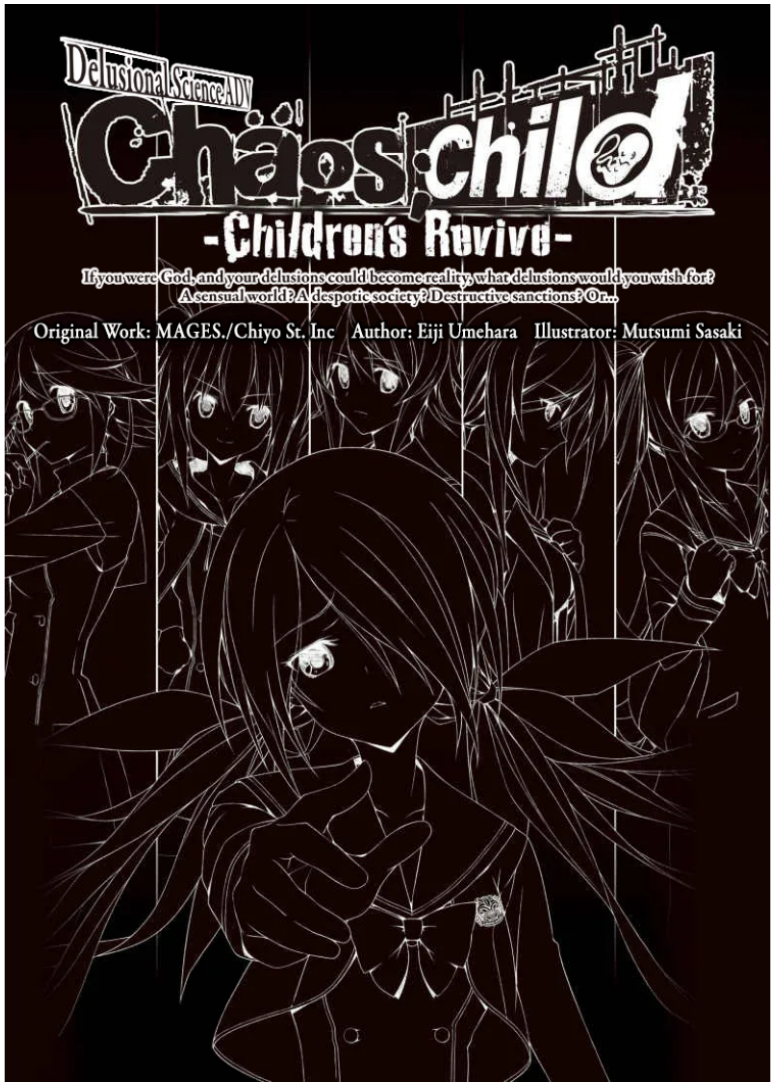
Delusional Science ADV
Chaos;Child
-Children's Revive-
If you were God, and your delusions could become reality, what delusions would you wish for?
A sensual world? A despotic society? Destructive sanctions? Or...
Original Work: MAGES./Chiyo St. Inc Author: Eiji Umehara Illustrator: Mutsumi Sasaki

Delusional Science Adventure

Chaos;Child: Children's Revive

Fall 2015.

Six months have passed since the series of grotesque serial murders that shook Shibuya to its core, the "Return of the New Generation Madness," came to a close with the arrest of a single boy. Yet, even with the passage of time, the tragedies that befell the City of Youths have left countless scars in their wake.

Lost and adrift, the former Newspaper Club members seek to find meaning in a world that wishes to forget them and the boy that made them who they are.

Is love, solidarity, and peace possible to find in such a world? Or is the gaping hole left behind in each of them too big to ever fill?

From the award-winning Eiji Umehara, the original scenario writer behind the critically acclaimed *Chaos;Child*, comes an all-new story depicting what follows after the curtains fell.

When I received your reply, I realized that it was the first time I'd ever received a proper handwritten letter from you.
We've exchanged emails so many times over the years, but never actual letters...
It's a bit odd considering all the time we've spent together as brother and sister, don't you think?

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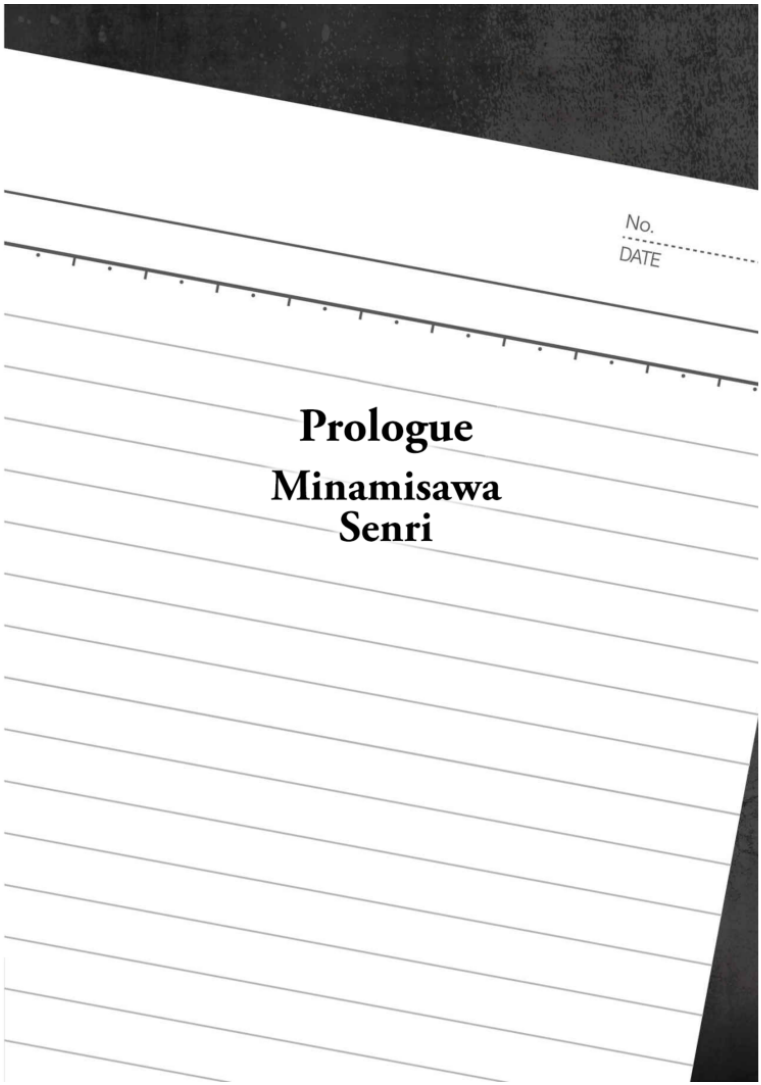


Prologue

Minamisawa Senri

Dear Takuru,

Thank you for your reply. I'm glad to hear my letter reached you safely.

Everything is going well at home. I'd been pondering what to do about our worrisome lack of a kotatsu, but in the end, we decided to purchase a new one yesterday. It had been quite some time since we'd gone to buy new furniture together, and while Yuto and Uki were both very excited as we chose our favorite one, I believe I may have been the most excited of all.

Once we returned home with the kotatsu in tow, we found ourselves redecorating the living room a little bit to match. You know that small table that sits in front of the sofa? The one with the scratches on the edge of it? Well, we placed that table in the storage room, put the kotatsu in its place, then moved the sofa over to the opposite wall. And while those changes seemed like a good idea at the time, I was still concerned the living room might end up feeling a little too cramped... and now that it's been two days since then, I'm beginning to think I may have been correct.

As I'm writing this, I'm eating dinner at our new little heated table. I'll admit, it's nice to have it around, but I'm afraid there's a bit of a problem... Whenever Arimura, Kazuki, or any other guests come to visit, I have a hard time shooing them out when it's time for them to leave; they never seem to want to get out from beneath our comfy little island, so I always find myself having to drag them out. I mean, goodness gracious, they've even attempted to make themselves even more comfortable by buying some legless chairs—without asking, I might add—leaving me to have to try and keep them from making themselves *too* at home.

Truly, nothing has changed. Everyone at home and our friends at school are all doing well.

When I received your reply, I realized it was the first time I'd ever received a proper handwritten letter from you. We've exchanged emails so many times over the years, but never actual letters... It's a bit odd considering all the time we've spent together as brother and sister, don't you think?

Takuru. I want you to know that you can tell me anything. No matter how silly you may think what you have to say is, you can rely on me. I will always be here for you.

Just as it was when I received your letter, I'm sure there are many things about you I have yet to learn. To be completely truthful with you, it's a little frustrating just how much I don't know... but at the same time, a large part of me is looking forward to making up for that lost time now.

Let's be sure to tell each other everything we've left unsaid over the years. Let's start over again from the beginning, recounting all the things we've already told each other... and when we can't think of anything else to say, we can start over again as many times as we need.

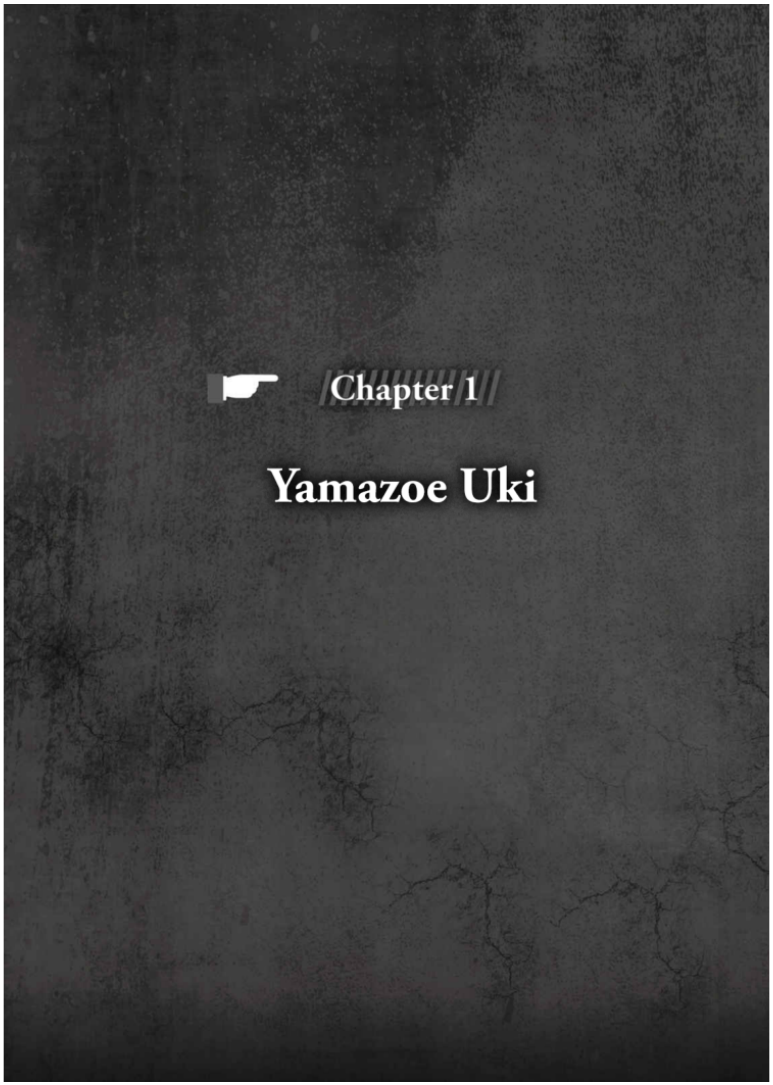
I hope that, as we continue to talk, I'll slowly begin to understand more and more about you. I realize this may be a lot to ask of you, but I still would like to ask it all the same.

It's gotten very chilly recently, so please take care of yourself. Make sure not to sleep with your stomach out.

I'll be writing to you again soon.

Sincerely,

Minamisawa Senri


Chapter 1
Yamazoe Uki

If you asked Yamazoe Uki what those several years of her life had brought her, she would have great trouble putting it into words. Even now, despite having had ample time to come to terms with it—to heal—she still couldn't seem to figure out exactly what she should take away from her experiences.

It was an undeniable fact that Uki had been confined in that location; to others, this must have screamed that she'd lived a terrible life, suffering under the yoke of those who did not care for even the most basic of human rights—and yet, Uki had never felt this way herself.

During those years, she had lived exclusively in a small, undersized room in a hospital basement. During those years, all her life had consisted of was a single task: to care for the patients who were being subjected to various experiments.

The basement had been completely cut off from the outside world. Her daily routine had repeated ad infinitum. But to Uki, those hadn't been problems at all. To her, that life had been perfect. To her, that had been where she'd belonged.

During her time at the hospital, there had been one patient who'd left a particularly deep impression on her. She was an old woman; while Uki did not know her exact age, she had been old enough to have grandchildren.

She was a truly beautiful woman, with black hair that reached down to her chest; she must have been quite proud of her hair, for she insisted that it be redyed a specific shade of black at least once a week, and she would not tolerate even a single split end. As it was prohibited to give the patients sharp objects of any kind, Uki would find herself trimming the woman's hair from dusk to dawn to prevent any complications.

Throughout the day, the woman had one phrase in particular that she would say: *"Are we going to the zoo?"* Or rather, that was all she would say. When Uki dyed her hair, she would say it. When Uki cut her hair, she would say it. When she was hungry, when she needed to use the bathroom, when she wished to protest her bedtime—no matter the activity or the desire, she would say it. Naturally, Uki would often be confused about what she was trying to convey; whenever this happened, to show her dissatisfaction, the woman would bite the back of her own right hand until she drew blood.

But the woman was far from alone in her struggles—every patient in the hospital basement was suffering from some form of mental disorder.

Distraught by her inability to communicate with the woman, Uki sought out one of the researchers who managed the basement; she wished to know what exactly the zoo meant to the patient she was caring for. The researcher was reluctant to respond at first, but when they considered that the patient's tendency to self-harm might escalate, they relented.

"Before she became a patient here, she would always go to the zoo in Ueno with her family," they told her.

The next time Uki met with the woman, she proposed something to her. "The next chance we have, let's visit your favorite zoo in Ueno together." Of course,

Uki had no way of knowing whether this would ever come to pass, but she made the suggestion all the same. And yet, the woman did not give a proper reply; all she said was, “Are we going to the zoo?”

After thinking for a moment, Uki decided to say something different. “Were you planning to visit there with your grandchildren?”

When she heard this question, the woman gave an entirely new response: she reached out her hand and gently touched Uki’s cheek. Their gazes met, and Uki saw that the emotions reflected in the woman’s eyes had very clearly shifted.

Without even a second thought, Uki lifted her hand to envelop the woman’s own. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m not your grandchild.”

Her words had been unplanned—she’d simply looked into the woman’s eyes and told her the truth. Even if lying to her may have perhaps brought her some comfort, Uki was struck by the feeling that she couldn’t—not to her.

The moment those words left Uki’s lips, the woman shook the girl’s hand off of hers. And then, before Uki could react, the woman brought her own hand to her mouth and sank her teeth into it.

“Are we going to the zoo?” she repeated again and again. She was biting herself far harder than usual, to the point where she was beginning to tear away chunks of flesh. Panicking, Uki had to forcefully stop her.

Two weeks later, the woman passed away.

When Uki asked what on earth had happened, the researcher informed her that she had been given an improper dosage of medication; as they shared this terrible news, the researcher’s tone of voice was one of disappointment—like they had simply dropped and broken a coffee mug they’d grown accustomed to using.

If nothing else, Uki wished to see her body. Her former patient had always insisted that her hair be dyed at all times, unable to tolerate even a single gray hair; so, before she departed, Uki simply wanted to dye her hair one last time. But this would not be permitted to her. The body had already been disposed of, and Uki was told not to waste any more time thinking about the deceased.

On the pillow of the now-empty bed, a single strand of the woman’s long hair remained—like the last struggling ember of a burning memory. The artificial black caught her eye immediately, its gleam demanding her attention.

When faced with the choice of whether to throw it away or flush it down the toilet, Uki found herself unable to decide. *Which would bring it closer to where it should be?* she pondered.

The following day, she realized that the hair had disappeared, likely from having been exposed to the moving air. In that moment, Uki realized that even if she had been afforded the choice, it would’ve likely been pointless—for it would never have truly returned to whom it belonged.

After that day, Uki stopped asking the researcher about her former patient. While she did not blame herself for the woman’s death, the thought that perhaps

something may have been different now if she had pretended to be her granddaughter—even if only for a moment—haunted her.

What had the woman felt as she'd spent her days in that hospital? Had she, too, lived in a wonderful world kept hidden from the outside? In a little slice of heaven that couldn't have been more perfect? If that was how she had seen her life, then perhaps her actions had been a way of protecting herself. To her, the world had been a truly happy place... and Uki couldn't help but feel that she had come along and poked a deep, gaping hole into it.

A sudden noise roused Uki from her slumber. Bringing her hand to her eyes, she found them to be slightly wet. She had been crying—an event that often followed her dreams of the past.

With a soft sigh, Uki wiped away the tears streaming down her cheeks. The lights above her were switched off, allowing for small streams of gold to seep into her room through the cracks in the door.

So that's what that noise was... Uki thought to herself.

Rising up from her bed, Uki slipped on her favorite cat slippers, wrapped her arms around herself to brave the sudden cold, and slowly made her way out of the room, careful not to make even a single sound.

"Oh, goodness gracious, did I wake you?"

As Uki made her way downstairs from the third floor, her suspicions were quickly proven correct: standing in the kitchen was Senri.

"Not really..." Deliberately avoiding giving her a definitive answer, Uki moved to help her sister prepare the tea, only for Senri to interrupt her.

"Don't put the cart before the horse, young lady. If you'd like to help, put on a jacket first. It's freezing in here," she said. "You can go ahead and get beneath the kotatsu. I'll be right there." Senri gestured toward the heated table in the living room as she spoke, and Uki relented.

Retrieving her jacket from the chair it had been draped over, Uki slipped into it before sitting down in the spot right across from the sofa—a place that had become her go-to location when it came time to gather in the living room. Upon further examination, Uki realized that her sister—being the provident person she was—had turned on the kotatsu before she could, meaning it was already nice and toasty.

Just as always, the green tea Senri had prepared for the both of them was truly delicious. As she sipped from her cup, Uki lamented her own lack of talent; she had always known she could never measure up to her sister in terms of cooking, so she had taken up tea-brewing instead. And yet, despite her best efforts, her tea still paled in comparison to her sister's.

"Is Yuu doing okay?" Uki asked.

"I hope so," Senri answered with a soft smile.

Their younger brother, Yuto, suffered from a fear of the dark—a fear that

would often cause him to wake up in the middle of the night. Whenever this happened, Senri would always stay with him until he managed to fall asleep again, and then she would spend around an hour or so in the living room before finally returning to her room.

Uki had never asked her why exactly she wouldn't just go back to bed right away, but she was fairly certain it was for Yuto's sake; in all likelihood, she was worried about whether or not their brother was truly getting a good night's rest. What further added to this theory was the fact that Senri would never allow the TV to remain on at night, and yet, on nights such as those, Uki would often see its distinct glow emanating from the hallway. But Senri had not braved the night alone for long; at some point down the line, whenever Uki happened to wake up, she'd begun to accompany her sister in the living room.

Suddenly, Senri realized something. "Oh, I almost forgot. Here, you can have this." She retrieved a book from one of the cheaply made shelves that adorned their house and handed it to Uki. It was a thick workbook for those who sought to attend nursing school in the future; Senri had been reading through it over the last several days.

"Are you already done with it?" Uki asked, slightly shocked.

"Well, I originally bought it at a used bookstore to serve as a bit of review—a stitch in time saves nine, you know?—so there might be a few pencil marks here and there... but yes, I'm done with it," Senri replied.

Flipping through the workbook, Uki found that, from cover to cover, all the questions in the workbook had been marked with pencil—likely to distinguish the questions she had answered from those she had not. Uki tried her hand at understanding a few of the problems she came across, only to find herself at a complete loss.

Seeing the strain on Uki's face, Senri spoke up. "Don't worry, you'll understand it better when you get to high school," she said with a chuckle.

"Really?"

"Of course. It doesn't matter what nursing school you go to—they always ask about the fundamentals, which are high school level. That means English, Japanese, math, and so on."

"They want you to write essays too, don't they...?"

Senri nodded enthusiastically—judging from her face, she seemed awfully pleased for some reason. Uki's face, meanwhile, only seemed to fall further and further.

Uki and Senri shared a goal—they aspired to become nurses in the future. But to Uki, this path to the future seemed far, far steeper than it was for her sister. To her, it was almost impossible to believe she would ever be able to solve this thick workbook of questions—questions that seemed incomprehensible to her now—let alone in a few days as her sister had.

"Oh, Uki... To tell you the truth, if I handed you this book and you were able to

answer the questions at your grade level, it would probably whittle away a good amount of the self-confidence I *do* have. So turn that frown upside down," Senri said softly, elbowing Uki lightly as she did. She then retrieved a textbook and another workbook, flipped them both open, and began to study like she would any other night.

Uki, on the other hand, had already finished her homework for the day, so, instead of following her sister's example, she retrieved a pen and paper from another one of the shelves—a spot that had become her own dedicated storage space—and began to write a letter to Takuru. Her topic would merely be a recount of the simple, ordinary things that had been happening to her recently.

The first time she had written a letter to him, she had been concerned about the prospect of it being censored during transit, but she had long since grown accustomed to working around that.

"Just keep it simple, Uki. Think of it like you're writing in a diary." Senri's words rang in her mind; the first time Uki had written a letter to Takuru, Senri had been the one to put her sentiments to paper.

Over time, Uki had learned what things she could say and what things she couldn't. She mainly couldn't speak about things only her friends could've known—things only the people who knew the truth behind the case could've known. And among those people who knew the truth was Takuru himself—her brother. Her brother who had, for the very first time, sent a response to her most recent letter.

"I'm so glad he's doing all right..." Senri murmured. Uki gave a light nod in response; there was no ambiguity as to whom she was referring.

Without looking up, Senri continued to speak. "Did you write about us going and buying the kotatsu?"

"Yes," Uki answered quietly.

"Good."

Uki really did enjoy the time she spent writing to her older brother. Time would simply fly by as she wrote about him, her younger brother, her sister, school, or just whatever came to mind. Strangely, even though she had only just woken up, not a hint of drowsiness affected her—instead, she found herself in a state of deep comfort, as if she had just been roused from a light sleep.

As she continued to write, Uki gazed up at her sister. Senri's hair, which was typically in pigtails that hung all the way down to her waist, was instead tied in a single bun atop her head; as a matter of course, her face, which would typically be hidden by her bangs, was clearly visible.

In that moment, Uki couldn't help but think about how pretty her sister was. This was far from the first time she had thought such a thing; she had always found her sister to be an incredibly beautiful girl, with a lovely face to match. Her friend Hinae would often say, *"Seriously, I can't get over her stupid face. It's just not fair—if you're younger than her, she looks like your older sister who you'd tell anything*

to, and if you're older than her, she looks like the cutest younger sister ever, who you'd die trying to protect. It's like, no matter what, she wins. It's so, SO not fair." And, truthfully, Uki could somewhat identify with those sentiments—as exaggerated as they were.

And yet, despite this fierce gap in appearances, the one area Uki most felt she could never compare to her older sister was her inner strength.

Three months ago, Uki, Senri, and Yuto had all been discharged from the hospital after completing their rehabilitation from Chaos Child Syndrome. Not long after they had returned to their lives at Aoba Dorm, one night, Yuto had had a panic attack. It was the first one he'd had since returning from the hospital.

For the first several minutes, he endured the fierce hyperventilation and heart palpitations all by himself, but, at some point during it all, he rolled off of his bed and crashed to the floor. The very second she heard the noise, Uki, together with Senri, quickly raced to his room, and upon realizing what was going on, they stayed with him until he calmed down.

The next morning, Senri asked Yuto why he'd felt that he had to endure such a thing all alone. Initially, Yuto could not answer; as he searched for a response, he looked as if he was struggling deeply with something—until eventually, he responded. "I just... I felt like I couldn't keep relying on you guys forever. I *can't* keep relying on you guys forever. I have to grow up and do things on my own..."

Suddenly, Senri raised her voice; she was not particularly loud, but the way she responded was so sharp and so striking, it caused Uki to jump in surprise. "Who do you think we are, Yuto?!" she cried, and, before anyone could react any further, she embraced him. Yuto attempted to protest, but it was futile—she was not having any of it.

Refusing to let him go, Senri repeated the question again and again. "Who do you think we are...?"

Ever since then, whenever Yuto had a panic attack, he would call for Senri immediately before it got worse. But, no matter how bad it got, he would never call for Uki; the reason for this was one she already knew.

Uki did not know the details behind why Yuto had become afraid of the dark; she had been told that he had been left in the dark for a very long period of time during the Shibuya Earthquake seven years prior, but she did not know what had happened during that time, how long he had been there, nor how he had managed to be rescued. Senri, on the other hand, did.

There were a number of other reasons aside from this for why Yuto did not call for Uki, one of which being the fact that she was only two years older than him; Senri was older than Uki, meaning it was likely far less embarrassing for him to call on her instead. As well as this, she and he had simply been together for much longer, with Senri serving as his older sister since far before Uki had come along.

But, even with all those reasons, Uki felt the most damning one of all was that she did not have the inner strength her sister did—she didn't have the strength to step in and ask Yuto why he was afraid of the dark, all because of a fear of her

own: the fear of being rejected. But that terror was not a lone one—what terrified her most of all was that, if she were to step in, she might tear open all the wounds that Yuto had been trying so hard to overcome. This fear had been born from a day that was burned into her memory—the day when she had carelessly stepped in and said something she shouldn't have.

As she thought about this, the artificial darkness of that woman's hair flashed in her mind.

"Is something the matter, Uki?" Senri asked.

"Huh?" Uki said, coming back to herself.

"You're spacing out. Is there a bee in your bonnet? Is the kotatsu not warm enough?" As Senri worriedly peered at her face, Uki waved her hand in front of herself to signal that nothing was wrong.

Senri was sitting on the side of the kotatsu that rested closest to the kitchen. As she would so often run back and forth between the two locations, it had naturally become her very own spot beneath the heated table.

As she gazed at her sister, Uki's feelings continued to stir. She was just so beloved, supporting both the house and the family with her seemingly boundless strength... Uki would never be able to measure up to her.

"I know something's wrong, Uki," Senri said, setting her pencil down and halting her studies.

After hesitating for a few moments, Uki began. "There's something I've been wanting to tell you for a few months now."

Becoming slightly nervous, Senri looked Uki directly in the eyes. "What is it?"

"Senri... don't you think you've been using a few... old-fashioned phrases recently?"

"Huh?"

"You just asked me if I 'had a bee in my bonnet.'"

"Sure I did. Is... is that not a normal thing to say? Surely it's not just me who says that..." Growing flustered now, Senri grabbed the edge of the blanket draped over the kotatsu and began to flap it up and down, fanning herself. While the phrase was not something she had never heard before, Uki did not know anyone under the age of sixty who still used it.

"Also, remember how you said 'don't put the cart before the horse'?"

"What? That's a normal phrase. Everybody says that..." Senri hesitated for a moment, clearly embarrassed. "Wh-What else would I say?"

"Well, certainly not 'goodness gracious.'" Uki heard the sound of Senri's words catching in her throat. "You also said 'a stitch in time saves nine.'"

"W-Well, I'm *choosing* to say these things. Sure, they might be old-fashioned, but this is what Ms. Takahashi says, and she's the one who's been teaching me

how to sew, so...” Senri’s cheeks were dyed a light pink as she blamed her way of speaking on their neighbor. Uki certainly hadn’t intended to fluster her sister that much, but Senri fell into a sheepish silence for a few moments all the same.

“I sure hope that people at school don’t think the same thing...” she groaned, letting her head fall dejectedly down onto the kotatsu.

“Don’t worry, I’m pretty sure Yuto and I are the only ones who’ve noticed,” Uki said with a slightly wry smile, and Senri gave yet another groan. Much like how she spoke, Senri tended to act like an older married woman whenever she was at home.

“Oh no... I have a sinking feeling that I might’ve said ‘goodness gracious’ in my latest letter to Takuru...” said Senri, dread clear in her voice.

“D-Don’t worry, it’s not really that big of a deal,” Uki reassured her. As she said that, she realized that she and Senri had spent far more time in the living room together than usual; a full two hours had passed since she had first come downstairs.

Before long, Senri spoke up once more, having likely come to the same conclusion. “I think it’s time the two of us go back to bed,” she said. Giving a short nod, Uki looked up from the paper toward Yuto’s room. There were no signs of him getting up once again; seeing this as well, Senri drank down the rest of her tea in one gulp, as if she was trying to forcefully switch off her alert, watchful state of mind.

“Good night, Uki. I’ll see you in the morning. Remember, you have to be up at nine o’clock sharp. I know you don’t have school tomorrow, but I expect you to be awake and dressed by then,” Senri said.

Uki let out a small gasp. She had forgotten all about what was happening the following day—she had even set her alarm clock already, yet she’d forgotten all the same. Her mouth hung open slightly at the realization.

“Is that why Yuu was having trouble sleeping?” Uki asked.

“I’m afraid he’s pretty worried about tomorrow. But I assured him there’s no need to be,” Senri said with a soft smile.

As Uki followed Senri back to her room on the third floor, she wondered why she hadn’t realized until now that thoughts of tomorrow could have been affecting Yuto. Perhaps that was why Senri had stayed in the living room for far longer than usual.

With a short, “Good night, Uki,” Senri softly closed the door. In that moment, Uki couldn’t help but notice that her sister appeared stronger than ever before.

◉◉◉

“Hello, everyone. My name is Ms. Komori, and I’ll be your new caregiver. I’ll be spending a lot of time with you from now on, and I look forward to getting to know you.”

The woman speaking, Ms. Komori, was in her late twenties. She was dressed in a gray suit, with hair reaching down to her shoulders. Her face appeared warm and gentle, pairing quite well with her sleek hair. She was about the same height as Senri, but, despite how thin she was, she had a strong physique akin to that of an adept track-and-field athlete.

"It's nice to meet you," said Senri, bowing her head. Uki and Yuto, who were standing right beside her, bowed along with her.

Aoba Dormitory, the place where Uki and her family lived, was a regional facility known as a group home. The purpose of a group home was to provide care for children who had no living relatives or were unable to stay with their parents due to abusive, neglectful, or other poor conditions, with an ultimate goal of raising them into capable adults who could function on their own. Unlike orphanages, group homes typically had far fewer people staying in them, and they were often situated in normal, residential homes; Aoba Dorm was no exception to this, being a three-story building with a maximum capacity of six.

As a general rule, there had to be at least one trained caregiver assigned to each of these homes, but for about three months after Uki and her family had returned to Aoba Dorm, no such worker had been officially assigned to the facility. Instead, various different individuals had come by to check in on them, from general childcare workers to nutritionists; and just when the family thought they had exhausted the entire supply of people who worked those jobs, even doctors and policemen had stopped by.

Every time someone visited the facility, they would observe how the family spent their day, ask them questions about both their medical histories and the case, and then they would be gone before the day ended. Even Uki, who knew very little about how orphanages and group homes worked or the laws surrounding them, could tell that their living conditions were of great concern to the adults who visited them.

As Senri led Ms. Komori to the table in the upstairs kitchen, suddenly, the older woman stepped in front of them, blocking their path. "I'm pretty sure you were already informed, but I've been assigned to this house... In fact, I'm the *only* one who's been assigned here," she said. "Normally, there'd be someone to cover the NOC shift—er, someone who'd be here at night—but... Well, actually, there's normally supposed to be *multiple* other people—maybe two or three more—but that doesn't seem to be the case here, I'm afraid..."

"It's all right. We're used to it," said Senri.

"Good to know..." Ms. Komori hesitated for a moment. "So, I'm assuming you're Ms. Minamisawa?" Senri gave a quick nod. "You must be the big sister around here. If I ever need something, you'll be the first one I turn to. But I'm sure you're used to that, too, huh? It's very nice to meet you, Ms. Minamisawa."

"It's nice to meet you, too."

Turning to Uki, Ms. Komori said, "Then, I guess that makes you Uki?"

"Yes. It's nice to meet you," Uki responded, giving the smallest bow possible.

“It’s my pleasure,” Ms. Komori said before turning to Yuto. “And you must be Yuto.”

“Yeah... Nice to meet you,” he said timidly, bowing his head nervously from beside Uki. As he spoke, his voice trembled slightly; perhaps noticing this, Ms. Komori gave a light chuckle.

“Nice to meet you too, Yuto. I hope we can become good friends,” she said. “Now, I’m sure they also told you this beforehand, but I won’t be able to be here all the time. Obviously I’ll stop by every day, but it’ll only be from breakfast until dinnertime.”

Uki heard a small sigh of relief escape Yuto. He had already heard of this fact when he’d first learned of the random woman joining them, but getting confirmation that her hours would indeed be limited had likely put him much more at ease. Although she didn’t show it, Uki felt the same way.

“What time do you all usually eat breakfast?” Ms. Komori asked.

“A little after seven. As for dinner, the time we eat usually shifts from day to day, but it’s almost always after seven o’clock at night,” Senri answered.

“And do you do the cooking?”

“Actually, no—as of late, everyone here’s been helping out in the kitchen,” Senri said with a smile; Uki and Yuto smiled as well, but theirs were far more forced. While it was true the three of them spent time in the kitchen together, the vast majority of the time, Senri would be doing all the work while the two younger siblings performed far simpler tasks.

“Well, then... It really sucks that I have to say this, but I’m afraid I already need something from you all...” Suddenly, Ms. Komori bowed her head and clapped her hands together to make a sincere request. “The truth is, I’m a total disaster when it comes to cooking, so I’ll need you to take over there... but I’ll obviously help out here and there if you need me!” she said sheepishly.

The children were taken aback for a moment, but after exchanging a few looks with each other, it didn’t take long for them to smile and laugh.

“It’s all right. We’re used to it,” said Senri, repeating what she had said before.

“Oh, if you’re worried about money, you don’t have to be. I know everything’s been a bit of a mess for you all until now, but with me taking the reins here, I’ll make sure the grocery bills and any other expenses are covered.”

“Oh, I’m glad you brought that up.” As she said that, Senri placed a thick stack of papers on the table; bound together by a large binder clip, it contained a detailed list of many different figures, items, and various other things. Seeing Ms. Komori’s confused expression, Senri explained what exactly it was. “This here is the household ledger.”

“I’m sorry?” Ms. Komori said, baffled. Noticing the sheer confusion on the caregiver’s face was not disappearing, Senri picked up the stack of papers and flipped a page upward. Ms. Komori’s expression quickly turned to one of shock.

“You put all this together?”

“Yes. Though this is nowhere near all of it. As you can see, this facility is financed by the savings left to us by my father, who, regrettably, is currently missing. We are exempt from tuition fees and any CCS-related medical fees so long as we continue attending Hekiho Academy, so there is no issue when it comes to those. Unfortunately, this means all other expenses must be covered by our limited savings. There is an organization that has provided a fund for ex-CCS patients, but I have not applied for it due to both the amount offered and the specific criteria being unclear.”

“Huh...”

“So while we are by no means living a life of splendor, because the house is owned by our missing father, we are fortunate enough to not have to worry about rent, and the savings our father accrued are not a particularly small sum. Additionally, I will soon be attending nursing school on a scholarship, and I will be getting a job as well—albeit a part-time one. I know the law says I have to leave this group home after I turn twenty, but I’ve been made aware that there is currently a strong movement pushing to allow special exceptions for facilities that admit ex-CCS patients. Even if this movement doesn’t prove successful, I know it’s still possible for individuals to make donations to specific group homes of their choosing.”

Overpowered by the girl sitting before her, Ms. Komori could only nod and stammer. “I-I see you have this very thought out.”

“Both Uki and Yuto have distinct goals for the future, and they both hope to receive scholarships so they can pursue higher education. Of course, I can’t claim to know what the future holds, but that notwithstanding, I’ve already made the calculations: Even if we receive no income from any sources other than my future job, I know for a fact that we will be able to get by. For this reason, except in the case of emergency, there is no need for anyone to come into our house to provide financial support. We are just fine as we are.”

After hearing this long, detailed explanation, Ms. Komori fell silent, her eyes slowly scanning the ledger Senri had constructed. When she at last finished reading, she hid her face behind her hands. “You said you’re only nineteen, Ms. Minamisawa?” she said through them.

“Yes. I am nineteen years old,” Senri said calmly.

“How the...?” In a voice of pure astonishment, Ms. Komori continued to speak without lowering her hands from her face. “All right, I think I’m picking up what you’re putting down here... I can’t make a decision right here and now, but for what it’s worth, I’m fairly certain that you’ll get your wish. The budget we have is fairly small, and everywhere else’s got the same problem.”

Senri gave a quick nod in response. Peeking through the gaps between her fingers, Ms. Komori looked at Uki and Yuto. “You two have a very impressive sister here,” she said, and the two immediately smiled and nodded. With that, Ms. Komori gave a small smile back, tucked the stack of papers into her shoulder bag,

and slowly stood up. “Right. Well, I’m only really here to introduce myself, so I should really get out of your hair... But before I go, I’d at least like to get a quick look around the place. Would you mind giving me a little tour? I’d especially like to see everybody’s rooms.”

Uki and the others then began to give Ms. Komori a cursory tour of Aoba Dormitory, from the first floor to the third floor. The farther in she ventured, the more impressed she found herself with just how clean the entirety of the home was; perhaps she harbored a certain fixation with cleanliness, as each facet she inspected received a nice, approving nod from her. “If the bathroom is clean, that’s the best sign that you’re in a good spot,” she said toward the end.

After around ten minutes, Ms. Komori was satisfied. “All right, I think I’ve seen enough. I’ll see you all tomorrow,” she said before immediately showing herself out; the speed of her footsteps had increased significantly since her arrival at the dormitory.

When the door at last closed, a strange silence fell over the three siblings; they all looked at each other, trying to gauge how exactly the others were feeling after what had just happened.

“Well... she’s got a lot of energy, huh?” said Yuto. And, with the silence broken, Uki and Senri laughed, the two of them awash with relief.

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It was just as he’d said—Ms. Komori was a very assertive, energetic, cheerful young woman, and she went on to be a great caretaker for them. Every day, she would arrive just after 6:30 when everyone was getting ready for breakfast. She would eat breakfast with them, and when they were all finished, she would send them off to school. Then, once the late afternoon came and they returned home, she would welcome them back, eat dinner with them, and then leave for the night.

As she had already admitted on the day she’d met them, she wasn’t an awfully good cook. However, on that very same day, she’d purchased a detailed cookbook and had been practicing very hard since. So hard, in fact, that it was as though she thought her very reputation as a caregiver was on the line.

Additionally, she would even occasionally stay at the dormitory until after 10 PM to talk with the kids. Even as Yuto’s eyelids grew heavy, they would all bond over stories of her love life, the many disasters that had taken place back when she had been in school herself, and much, much more, all as howls of laughter echoed throughout the dormitory. As they grew closer, she even developed pet names for each of the three kids: Senny, Yuki, and Yu-Yu. She even volunteered to help tutor Uki and Yuto after dinner, saying, “Surely I’ll be able to handle it until they’re out of middle school, right?” only to find herself completely out of her depth with Uki’s homework; Senri could never have expected both Uki *and* Ms. Komori would come to her in tears begging for help.

As the days continued to pass by, the time she spent with them after dinner

would grow longer and longer. Whenever Uki asked her if it was really all right for her to stay so awfully late, she would always reply the same way: “Eh, caregivers are more than used to that,” she would say with a laugh.

During the daytime, when Uki and the others were at school, Ms. Komori would take care of all of the housework, including laundry, vacuuming, as well as general cleaning and upkeep. Before she had come along, these chores had been split evenly among the three siblings; for this reason, they were reluctant to put the burden squarely on their new caregiver’s shoulders. When they expressed this concern to her, however, all she said was, “I have to do *something* around the house. I don’t want to just be some freeloader who raids your pantry.” Even after she said this, however, the three were still unsure, but she quickly put her foot down.

At first, Uki felt somewhat uncomfortable now that her routine was being disrupted slightly, but that discomfort was quickly replaced with gratitude; putting her own situation aside, this would lighten the load on Senri and Yuto, which she couldn’t have been happier about.

It had been about ten days since Ms. Komori had first started attending Aoba Dormitory as a caregiver. That evening, Uki and Yuto had left school fairly early, and upon arriving back at the dormitory, they took her and went straight to their go-to supermarket.

After scouring the store for milk and eggs at the lowest possible prices, they were sifting through the shopping list Senri had given them when they saw two women stealing glances at them from a distance.

Again? Uki and Yuto both thought to themselves. Pretending not to notice them, the two immediately went to leave the store. Ms. Komori, however, refused to move.

Grabbing Uki’s hand, she whispered, “What’s going on?” Her voice had a noticeable sharpness to it; she must have sensed the tension in the air.

“It happens all the time,” Uki answered, keeping her voice low enough that the women would not hear.

Being exposed to the curious eyes of those around them was an everyday occurrence for Uki and her family. One of Chaos Child Syndrome’s primary symptoms was an unusual one: the bodies of the young people suffering from it experienced rapid aging. This meant that, even if their symptoms improved greatly, their appearances ensured they would always be a constant topic among the public.

But this was not the only reason they often fell victim to the public eye: Uki and her family lived in Aoba Dormitory, the same place where Miyashiro Takuru, the alleged mastermind behind the horrible series of murders labeled the Return of the New Generation Madness, had previously resided. As well as this, one of the victims of the murders, Tachibana Yui, Yuto’s sister by blood, had also lived there. For these two reasons, when Uki, Yuto, and Senri had all been hospitalized during their rehabilitation, the media had repeatedly barged into the room they’d

shared; even now that they'd returned to their home, Aoba Dormitory, they were constantly bombarded by photographers taking pictures without their consent, as well as reporters probing them with questions and asking them for comments on multiple occasions.

To avoid being noticed, Uki examined the two women from the corner of her eye—only to realize that she had actually seen them somewhere before. She didn't know what their names were, which led her to believe they were most likely just neighbors of theirs who shopped at the same supermarket.

"Can we please go, Ms. Komori?" Uki urged the caregiver, pulling on her hand; but once again, Ms. Komori did not budge. Instead, she did the exact opposite—she shook away Uki's hand and stepped in front of her and Yuto, shielding them behind her. She was staring straight at the two women with a fierce scowl.

"M-Ms. Komori?" said Uki. But Ms. Komori did not respond—she simply continued to glare directly at the two women. This went on for a few moments, and then, Ms. Komori took another step forward, only for the two to awkwardly look away and briskly scuttle toward another section of the store.

After paying for their groceries, the three left the store, the heavy air from before looming ever presently.

As they walked, Ms. Komori turned to look at the two kids. "Is this really how it is for you all?" she asked. The expression on her face was a serious one; judging purely from the sound of her voice, one could never have imagined that she was the same woman who had been sharing silly stories with the kids in the dormitory.

"Yes," Uki replied; she gave a short shrug of her shoulders, suggesting that it really did not matter to her all that much. "But we don't let it bother us. It's okay."

However, Ms. Komori's expression did not change.

"Are you sure? No one's ever hurt you or anything, have they?" she asked imperatively. "The moment—no, the *second* you ever feel like you're in any kind of danger, I want you to tell me immediately."

"Y-Yes, I'm sure. And no one's ever done anything, I promise," Uki stammered, somewhat intimidated by the caregiver's change in demeanor.

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On their way back home from the store, Ms. Komori did not say a single word; she simply kept her eyes trained on their surroundings, and she was very clearly tense. Upon arriving back at the dormitory, they found an elderly woman standing at their front door with a shopping bag in her hand.

"I'm sorry, who are you?" Ms. Komori asked in a wary voice.

The old woman scowled momentarily upon seeing Ms. Komori, but that quickly faded when she saw Uki and Yuto in tow.

“Good evening, Ms. Takahashi,” Uki said.

“Good evening to you too, Uki. Were you out shopping?” Ms. Takahashi asked.

“Yes. We were out of a few things. Oh, I’m so sorry, I haven’t introduced you—this is Ms. Komori, our new caregiver.”

“Oh, I see! So you’re taking care of these little angels, are you? Hello there, my name is Ms. Takahashi,” she said with a bow. Ms. Komori, however, did not return the bow at first; she was clearly still suspicious.

“This is the lady who’s been teaching Big Sis a whole bunch of things,” Yuto interjected, and after a moment passed, Ms. Komori’s expression relaxed. She bowed back to the elderly woman, then introduced herself. “Hello, my name is Ms. Komori. I’ve been stationed here for a little over a week now. And I apologize for being so rude.”

“Oh, it’s quite all right. My, though, you’ve been here for a week already? It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Komori. I couldn’t even begin to tell you how much I owe the owner of this clinic... Whenever I had the time to spare, I would always spend my days chatting with my friends in that quaint little waiting room. That’s how I met these children, actually—and we’ve always gotten along just swimmingly.”

“By the owner, I’m assuming you mean Dr. Wataru Sakuma?”

“Yes, that’s the one. My, just where on earth has that man gone off to?” Ms. Takahashi mused. “Say, Ms. Komori? May I ask you a small favor? If you ever hear from the good doctor, would you be a dear and give me a ring? My friends and I would just love to share a cup of tea with him again.”

With that, the elderly woman handed Uki a shopping bag full of persimmons—a common thing she would share with her—and departed.

With no reason to stay outside any longer, the three headed inside the dormitory. But before they had even managed to take their shoes off, Ms. Komori had a couple questions to ask them. “Is she telling the truth? Have you really known her for that long?” she said, locking the door with a loud *ka-chunk*.

“Yeah. I met her when I first came here,” Yuto replied.

Ms. Komori went silent for a moment before responding. “Okay.”

Noticing that their caregiver was deep in thought, Yuto made sure to emphasize something. “She’s a nice person, Ms. Komori.”

Ms. Komori quickly shook her head. “No, no—I don’t doubt that. It’s just...” Setting down the food she had bought from the supermarket on the floor, she sat down on the small step leading into the building. She pressed her hand squarely against her forehead and looked up at the two children. Her eyes appeared somewhat nervous.

“Yuki. Yu-Yu,” she began, looking between the two. “I wasn’t planning on bringing this up again, as you all seem to be doing fairly well for yourselves, but... how do I say this... you two are in a fairly unusual situation right now. Actually,

no, not unusual—*difficult*."

As Ms. Komori tried her best to choose her words carefully, Uki set down the bag of persimmons. She swallowed back the saliva that had begun to build in the back of her throat.

"I don't really know how to put this, but... basically, you're all former CCS patients, but considering you had both a victim and the perpetrator in your family... Well, people are oftentimes going to be more concerned with the latter there, which means a ton of rumors. Especially when the case is as bizarre and grotesque as this o—"

"Please stop," Yuto interrupted. It was clear from his tone alone that he had grown very angry. "If you're going to say something bad about my brother, then just stop." His voice was strong, fierce conviction bleeding from his every word as he clarified exactly what it was he wished to convey—and even though he had kept his voice below a shout, his words still echoed throughout the room.

The shock on Ms. Komori's face was palpable, but it grew even more so when she looked to Uki; she, too, was glaring at her now.

Silence fell over the room. As the caregiver anxiously hoped that one of the children would say something to release the tension bearing down on her, she soon found that she would have no such escape.

After a moment, she broke the silence. "Okay," she said, slowly standing up. "I just want you two to understand. The thought that something might happen to you... It makes me worry. That's all. So please, you two... just be careful."

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About a week later, Yuto called both Uki and Senri into the living room to discuss something. It was about 11 PM, meaning Ms. Komori had already left for the night, and both Uki and Yuto would've normally been in bed.

The moment she took her usual place around the kotatsu, Senri immediately cut to the chase. "Is this about Ms. Komori?"

Uki looked toward Yuto, and he gave a short, slightly curt nod; Uki had crafted the same theory as Senri prior to the meeting, and it seemed they had both been correct.

Ever since the incident that had occurred with Ms. Komori at the door, Yuto had assumed a fairly distant attitude toward the caregiver. He was not outright ignoring her, but he had made no effort to close the clear sense of distance that had been erected between them. They had gotten along swimmingly before that one spat, but now, they barely even spoke anymore; it was as if they had gone right back to being strangers.

But this was not exclusive to Yuto. Despite the fact that what had caused the rift couldn't even be called an argument, Uki also acted the same way Yuto was. Ms. Komori, on the other hand, still treated the two children the same way she had been before, but there was a clear sense of discomfort coming from her as

well.

“Is what she said still bothering you?” Senri asked gently, having already been told what had happened by him and Uki.

“No, it’s not that... Actually, I guess that might be part of it,” Yuto mumbled. After a brief silence, he leaned forward slightly, as if he was about to tell them a big secret. “I think Ms. Komori might be looking into the case,” he said in a very hushed voice.

Uki and Senri both raised their eyebrows. “Why do you say that?” Senri asked.

“Well, you know how she’s been cleaning our rooms for us?” Yuto began to explain.

Uki nodded. This was nothing surprising—many group homes had the caregivers pay special attention to keeping the children’s rooms clean. The purpose of this wasn’t simply to maintain cleanliness, but to ensure that the children were properly taking care of their home environments. As Senri was what could best be described as a neat freak, however, the entirety of Aoba Dormitory never even came close to unclean.

“When you clean someone’s room, do you normally check the drawers?” Yuto continued.

Senri’s face twisted into a frown. “Had they been cleaned?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure? When were they cleaned?”

“I don’t know when exactly... but I’m pretty sure she was cleaning in there this afternoon. I thought something was off, so I left an eraser somewhere really specific as a test.”

“And did you find anything out from that?”

“Yeah. It was ever so slightly more to the left, but only by, like, a centimeter. So I know for a fact she was in there.”

“You really thought to do that?” Uki said, her voice simultaneously impressed and distraught. But Yuto’s expression did not change.

“It’s not just that, though,” he said. “Today, Ms. Takahashi came by, and while she was here, she told me that Ms. Komori had gone to her house the other day... and she said she was asking about *him*.”

Uki looked over at Senri; her sister’s face had suddenly turned very stern. There was only one person Yuto could have possibly been referring to.

Wataru Sakuma. The former head of Aoba Dormitory, as well as Aoba Clinic down on the first floor. He was also the foster father of Senri and Yuto, and he had taken care of Uki for a short time as well; during that period, she had come to see him as a father to her.

The truth behind his involvement in the case had been told to the three

children a little over six months prior during their rehabilitation in the hospital. The moment they had heard the news from Takuru, they simply couldn't believe it—they hadn't *wanted* to believe it. But, as he'd told them everything, his eyes had ensured his family knew that, no matter how much they didn't want to accept it, it was the real, unassailable truth.

Sakuma's involvement was something Takuru, Hinae, and the others had known about before the three residents of Aoba Dormitory had, and they had struggled greatly with whether or not to tell said residents up until the very moment it had left Takuru's lips. If Uki and Yuto hadn't agreed with Senri's request for him to tell them the truth, it was a very real possibility that it would have been kept from them forever.

According to the police, Sakuma had been reported missing shortly after the final murder had taken place. To this day, neither he nor his body had been found—but Uki and the rest knew what had really happened to him. They also knew who had made his body disappear, the person having likely done it for the sake of concealing the truth.

"What else did she ask her, Yuto?" Senri inquired, her voice slightly quieter than before.

"She asked what he was like when he was here, what kind of person he was, if he'd said anything about where he was going..." Yuto answered. "She also asked about Takuru."

"I see... Yuto, you just checked your drawers, correct? Was there anything missing?"

"I don't think so."

"I want you to go check one more time, just to be sure," Senri said. She then turned to Uki. "You check yours too, Uki, and I'll check mine."

The three went and inspected their rooms, but as far as they could tell, nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. This was especially true for Uki and Senri; even if they believed a few things had potentially shifted a few centimeters or so, they had not had the same forethought as Yuto, so there was no way for them to tell for certain. As far as they were aware, nothing was missing from any of their rooms.

Having finished inspecting his room, Yuto came and told Senri, "Yeah, I don't think anything's missing." Nodding, she moved to inspect the room located next to hers—the room situated in the corner across from Yuto's. Takuru's room. It was currently not being used, but it was still one that the three had been cleaning regularly until Ms. Komori had joined them.

"Nothing's missing, but... these files here are in a slightly different order than I remember having them in..." Senri muttered to herself as she examined the bookshelves, each row packed to the brim with books, magazines, and various files.

"You remember what order the files were in?" Uki asked in surprise.

“After the police took most of them away from us, I personally took what we had left from the box and arranged them here one by one. You two haven’t moved anything around since then, have you?”

“No... Does that mean she moved them?” Uki’s voice was growing increasingly uneasy.

Without taking her eyes away from the bookshelf, Senri responded. “Most likely. It’s true that our rooms seem to be in the same condition as usual, but if Yuto’s hunch is correct and she took extra care to make sure that it looked that way, then that means she wanted to hide something. If she *didn’t* want to hide something, then she would have just cleaned them normally. For example, it’s strange to me that Yuto’s eraser wasn’t *farther away* than it had initially been. After all, something like that shouldn’t matter while cleaning. As for why Takuru’s room doesn’t follow this rule... I assume it’s because she didn’t expect the owner would be back to notice.”

As she spoke, Senri’s tone was a detached one; in contrast, Uki’s had a clear sense of unsettlement to it as the words escaped from her lips. “Why would she do this?” she asked.

“Maybe she’s a reporter?” Yuto posited, even sounding mildly enthusiastic about the suggestion. “Like, maybe she’s been investigating the case, and when she gets enough info, she’ll sell the story. The reason she’s so weirdly protective of us all the time is so no one else can get the scoop and she can keep it all for herself.”

A smile of disbelief rose to Uki’s face. *Surely that’s not true*, it said. But Senri’s face did not show the same levity.

“Senri?” Uki said, trying to get a response, only for Senri to shake her head.

“I don’t think so, Yuto. She likely isn’t a reporter—I can verifiably say she was officially assigned here as a caregiver... although I suppose anyone can give tips to parties interested and get compensated for it. In fact, this is something we’ve run into quite a few times before,” she said.

As she watched Yuto nod his head, Uki recalled the many eyes that had been directed at the three of them over the last six months. Eyes of innocent curiosity that had risen during the periods of boredom and stagnancy the public had been facing. Eyes that held her family, as well as journalism as a whole, completely hostage, unaware that their gaze not only hurt those it was directed at, but that it left them utterly paralyzed.

“To that end, I hadn’t considered this until now, but I just realized that she took the physical ledger I put together. If she wanted to show it to her superiors, she could have simply asked that I send her a digital copy, but she intentionally took a very thick stack of papers with her,” Senri said.

“Wh-What do you think she did with it?” Yuto asked. He was getting angry now.

“Oh no... Maybe it was a mistake to use that as a bluff...” With a distraught

sigh, Senri retrieved a single file from the bookshelf. Concerned, Uki asked her to explain what she meant.

"I just wanted to be very clear with them about our financial situation. I wanted to show that we were doing everything right, and I wanted that to be in an easy-to-understand format. But, considering how it didn't accomplish that... I just can't believe how much paper I wasted... and we already have so little ink left..."

When she heard the true reason behind Senri's distress, Uki burst out laughing. She should have expected no less from the girl who would sprint home from school with her hair a complete mess all so she could make it in time for a limited-time-only sale. With her at the reins, the house budget had always been kept unusually tight.

Yuto must have felt the same way, for a wry smile appeared on his face. "Hehe. You never change, do you, Big Sis?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Senri said indignantly. Then, after a short pause, she looked up from the file she was holding. "All right, there's nothing missing from here, either. I didn't think there would be." Closing the file, she put it back on the shelf. She then gently placed her hand on Yuto's head. "As long as there's nothing missing, we can't confront Ms. Komori about this, nor can we ask her what she's looking for. We have no evidence, which means these conclusions may be entirely unfounded. If we were to confront her about it, she could simply point to this and act like she doesn't know what we're talking about, and that would be the end of it."

"You're right..." Yuto said, defeated. Naturally, Uki's hand found its way onto his head as well. She lightly stroked his hair. Yuto was a smart boy, and thus, he knew that what Senri was saying was true—that, despite his concerns, avoiding the topic for now was the right decision to make.

"I won't ask her about the ledger, either. That is, as long as it remains private—if it gets leaked somehow, I will. For now, though, let's act as if nothing happened. We can't lock our rooms from the outside anyway, so if she wants to investigate, just let her."

Stopping for a moment, Senri looked at her two siblings before placing her free hand on Uki's head. "Uki. Yuto. We have to act like we're not fazed by anything whatsoever. None of us have done anything wrong, and none of us are *going* to do anything wrong. So let's not do anything that would disappoint him, all right?"

Uki and Yuto responded with resounding smiles—as for whom she was referring to, there was no need for either of them to ask.

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Starting the following day, Ms. Komori slowly began to speak less and less. She still greeted the children when she arrived and she would still engage in the spare small talk, but there was the inescapable sense that their relationship had gone from warm and inviting to cold and businesslike.

A week had passed now. She wasn't joking around nearly as much as she had when she'd first arrived, and her own laughter was incredibly sparse. As well as this, she did not stay late after dinner, and she would oftentimes just leave as soon as she finished cleaning up.

Uki, much like Senri and Yuto, was simply acting as if everything were normal. However, there were times when she couldn't help but feel there was some hidden motivation behind what Ms. Komori was saying and doing. Even small things such as her saying, *"Welcome home. You're back a little late—is everything all right?"* or filling out her daily logbook—things integral to a caregiver's job—had become potentially suspect to Uki. And perhaps this attitude of suspicion bled through in Uki's words, for the atmosphere between her and Ms. Komori had grown noticeably more cold and distant than ever before.

Senri seemed to sense this change as well. One night, right after Ms. Komori departed for the day, Uki let out a sigh of relief, only for Senri to swiftly call her on it. "Uki," she said sharply.

"Sorry. I know I shouldn't do that," Uki said timidly. Senri gave a soft smile and patted her on the head.

Despite all the time that had passed, Ms. Komori had not said anything related to the incident at all, and the ledger that Senri was concerned about didn't appear to have been leaked, either.

However, one night during dinner, just when Uki was hoping her worries would finally prove to be unfounded, their mealtime was suddenly interrupted.

"Y'know, something's been on my mind for a little while now... Who used to sit there?"

Right in the midst of them enjoying a nice hotpot, those words from Ms. Komori caused everyone's hands to stop right in their places.

Uki was sitting in her normal spot; Senri and Yuto were sitting right next to each other on the side facing the kitchen; and Ms. Komori was on the side opposite to them, next to the sofa—the spot Yuto had always used to sit. Next to Uki, however—the seat located opposite to Senri and Yuto—was a spot left noticeably vacant. As for why it was vacant, it was an unspoken rule that the three children had naturally decided on. It was not one exclusive to them, either—whenever Hinae or Hana, frequent visitors to the dormitory, came by, they would never sit in that spot either. Of course, this also applied to Ms. Komori.

"Don't be silly. That spot isn't for anyone in particular—it's just that I only bought this kotatsu recently, so we haven't established our spots around it yet," Senri explained. Her voice was bright and cheery, and before she even finished speaking, she went right back to eating her meal. She was smiling, even. And yet, despite those outward signs of happiness, her eyes were dark and downcast; pointed away from Ms. Komori, they bored a hole into the top of the kotatsu.

Following her lead, Uki and Yuto resumed eating as well, but the two of them said nothing. As they ate, the sounds of their silverware clinking and clanking rang awfully loud in their ears.

“Was it Yui’s? I’ve noticed you always keep a chair open in the kitchen, too.” Ms. Komori continued to probe. Uki deliberately chose not to stop eating, struggling to hide the fact that her heart had leapt in her throat.

“No, it wasn’t. And no, we don’t.”

Rather than having Senri speak for him, Yuto himself denied the theory. His voice was strong and unwavering.

Ms. Komori set down her chopsticks and stopped eating. She was now looking squarely at the three children. “Then... was it Takuru’s?”

“I believe Yuto just told you that we don’t keep the chair open for any reason,” Senri answered, her agitation showing itself in her voice just slightly. It was the first time that Yui and Takuru’s names had ever come out of Ms. Komori’s mouth.

“If you aren’t doing it deliberately, then why is it always empty?”

Senri nearly said something but stopped herself before she could. Uki, who was staying silent as she watched her, understood that feeling as if it was one she herself held. Senri’s face was unquestionably still one of a child’s, and yet, in that moment, it shone as mature as could be; in that moment, it was as if she was one of the adults in the situation.

Silence ensued... only for Senri to speak up soon after. “I’m afraid it’s none of your business, Ms. Komori.”

“I’m sorry, I know this is a sore subject for you, but I really want to know. And while I obviously want to know more about Yui, I especially want to know just who exactly Takuru was to you—because, frankly speaking, I couldn’t possibly think less of him. To think that he hurt you all like he did... It’s unforgivable,” Ms. Komori spat out.

The moment Uki heard those words, a feeling arose inside of her that she couldn’t describe—one she had never experienced before. Unable to fight it, she aggressively slammed the plate she had been holding down onto the table. “It’s none of your business,” she said clearly.

With that, the meal continued in silence. Once they had all finished eating, Ms. Komori said that she would take care of the cleanup, and the three siblings let her do so. None of them had it in them to make any form of conversation, no matter how small.

Returning to her room on the third floor, Uki sat down at her desk—largely out of habit—but she was unable to concentrate on her homework. For some strange reason, the silence that came with her being alone in her room—a silence that never usually bothered her—was now *fiercely* bothering her. She climbed into her bed and attempted to go to sleep, but no matter how long she lay there, her eyelids never even grew the slightest bit heavy.

Eventually, Uki gave up and left her room. Heading downstairs, she noticed a light spilling into the hallway from the living room upstairs; Ms. Komori must have still been in the room. With how things were, Uki could not have possibly wanted to go in that room any less, so in the end, she simply continued going

downstairs.

When she arrived in the examination room of the now-defunct Aoba Clinic, she found Senri sitting at the computer—she hadn't even turned the lights on, leaving the dim glow to be the sole thing illuminating her. She seemed to be typing in data for the ledger she had been keeping.

She was more than likely aware that Uki had entered the room, but she continued working in silence all the same. Saying nothing herself, Uki sat down on the examination table, her feet dangling down from the side of it.

For several minutes, she simply watched her sister work, her body illuminated by the light of the monitor.

Eventually, Senri broke the silence. "Where's Yuto?" she asked.

"In his room, I think," Uki answered.

"Okay." Senri paused for a moment, then spoke up once more. "I'm sorry, Uki."

"No, don't be. I'm the one who should be sorry."

As the two talked, they could hear the sound of Ms. Komori talking upstairs; it sounded like she was on the phone with someone. Then, her voice began to grow louder, and she could be heard coming downstairs.

Senri immediately turned off the monitor. Uki was surprised at the sudden darkness that had overtaken the room, but before she could say anything, Senri took Uki by the hand, and the two of them slid into the imaging room adjacent to the examination room.

"Stay quiet," Senri whispered in her ear, and Uki nodded. The darkness was so thick, she could not even see her own hand in front of her face.

It didn't take long for Ms. Komori to enter the room, taking the girls' original place.

"Yes. ...Yes. I know. But they've definitely got their guards up now. Honestly, I have no idea what they're thinking," she said into the phone. The tone of her voice sounded different from the one Uki and the others were accustomed to; it was far closer to the one she had used when she'd questioned Uki and Yuto about the two women at the supermarket.

"At this point, it'll be fairly difficult to close the distance between us in just a few days," she continued. "So, no, I've heard nothing new about Miyashiro."

Uki felt Senri's body shift; Uki held her breath, not wanting to miss a single word from the muffled voice leaking in through the door.

The person on the other end of the phone spoke to Ms. Komori for what felt like an eternity. Neither Uki nor Senri could hear what they were saying, but it was clear that, whoever it was, they were raising their voice.

"I'm telling you, they're not like that. But even still, I promise you, no matter what, I won't rest until I get what we need from them. ...Yes. ...Yes. I understand.

I'm sorry it's taken so long, but please, just give me a little more time."

Following those words, Ms. Komori appeared to hang up the phone. A short pause ensued, and then, she let out a long, labored sigh.

She remained in the examination room for a while after that, but eventually, she could be heard heading for the entrance, exiting through the waiting room rather than the stairs. She must have been planning to leave.

Even after hearing the sound of the door being closed and locked, Senri still did not move. Uki, too, did not make a single sound, instead simply keeping her sister's hand clasped in her own.

Eventually, after a full minute had passed, Senri quietly urged Uki to leave the imaging room along with her. Despite the near complete lack of light in the room —the sole source of it streaming in through the lone window—Uki could see Senri's expression, her eyes having adjusted to the darkness. Never before had she seen her look so desolate.

"Even after all this time..." Senri said softly.

"Huh?" Uki responded, confused.

"Uki. Do you know whose seat that was?"

Uki fell silent, her face twisting into a grimace. Senri, meanwhile, smiled a smile just as desolate as her expression had already been; it was as if she had known exactly how her sister was going to react. "I feel just the same. When she asked me that, I... I couldn't answer her. Or... maybe it's more accurate to say that I didn't *want* to answer her... That's why I said... even after all this time... Even after all this time, I can't fill that seat..."

Uki did not know how to respond to her sister's words. What *was* it that kept them from sitting in that spot? Was it sentimentality? Regret? Or was it perhaps the warmth of the memories they had shared there?

"Senri, she was talking about Takuru... and she said she was trying to get information from us..." Uki said.

"I know," Senri replied. "I wonder if Yuto's intuition was right..." The desolation on her face had already disappeared, replaced by a firm, decisive look. Turning to Uki, she gave her the same instructions that she had before—to go on as if nothing had ever happened.

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One day later.

It was nearly dusk, and Uki and Senri had just returned home from school when they heard Ms. Komori's voice ring out from downstairs. "Senny! Yuki! Come here, quick!"

Rushing down the stairs, the two girls found Ms. Komori standing right next to Yuto at the entrance. Upon closer inspection, they were shocked to find that Yuto

had a large contusion coloring his forehead. Blood was seeping from the area surrounding it.

“Oh no, Yuu!” Uki shouted, running over to him. He was holding a handkerchief to the bleeding wound, and his lip was trembling as he tried his best to endure the pain.

“What on earth happened?!” Senri shouted.

“Someone threw a rock at him. I think it was an elementary schooler,” Ms. Komori explained.

“Uki, take him to the examination room. Get him under some light. I’ll be right there,” Senri commanded.

“Understood!” Uki immediately followed her directions and took Yuto to the examination room. He wasn’t disoriented—he could walk just fine—but he would occasionally let out short moans as his wound sent waves of pain through him.

Without saying another word, Senri sat him down on the examination table and looked directly at his eye. “Yuto, were you hit anywhere else besides your head and face?” she asked as she examined him.

“No,” he answered.

“Do you feel nauseous? Is your vision blurry at all?” she continued. Yuto insisted that he was fine, but Senri made him move the handkerchief away so she could inspect his wound.

“Looks like it’s a pretty clean wound... Do you know about how big the rock was?” Senri asked.

“I’m not sure... but I don’t think it was that big,” Yuto answered.

“Well, regardless, it certainly scraped you but good. Uki, I need a washcloth and some water, please. Oh, and some gauze and tape, too.”

“Got it,” Uki immediately replied.

“I-I know it seems like it just grazed him, but it’s still a head injury. Are you *sure* he doesn’t need to go to the hospital?” Ms. Komori pressed, the panic in her voice quite obvious—but Senri shook her head no. “Okay, then shouldn’t you at least disinfect it?”

“The wound isn’t very deep, and I can’t see anything in the cut, either. In this situation, it would be preferable to avoid disinfecting it and instead just wipe it with a warm washcloth while applying pressure to stop the bleeding,” Senri explained. As she did so, Uki arrived with the items she had requested; Senri took them and began to treat her brother’s wound. “Uki? Would you please treat Ms. Komori while I take care of your brother?” she said.

“Huh?” Uki said in confusion.

Without taking away any pressure from the washcloth, Senri gestured with her eyes toward Ms. Komori’s leg. “I can’t see for sure because of her jeans, but

judging from how she's covering up her leg, I believe she's injured, too. Am I correct, Ms. Komori?"

Awkwardly shifting in place, Ms. Komori answered. "I just fell down. It's nothing."

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It had all happened when Yuto had been on his way home from seeing a friend at the library. Shortly after the two parted, he was suddenly approached by a group of three elementary school students. They were around fourth or fifth grade, their clothes very representative of the most popular trends at the time.

The three boys asked if Yuto was from Aoba Dormitory; Yuto ignored the question, assuming it wasn't worth the trouble. But after a short period of silence, he suddenly felt an impact directly on his face. The very moment he realized that a partially full plastic bottle had been thrown at him, a hard rock immediately followed.

A member of the trio swung his arm down in an attempt to throw yet another rock at Yuto when suddenly, someone stepped in front of him, shielding him. It was Ms. Komori, who had just so happened to be passing by. The rock bounced off of her, but as a result of her stepping in front of Yuto so aggressively, the momentum sent her falling to her knees, and she scraped one of them badly on the ground. She then shouted furiously at the boys, and they all quickly ran away.

This was the story Ms. Komori told Uki and Senri around the dinner table; on that day, they had chosen to eat there instead of the usual kotatsu. The two sisters bowed to her in deep gratitude.

"Oh, don't be like that. Besides, you patched me up, so we're even anyway." As she said this, Ms. Komori stuck her knee out from beneath the table and tapped the bandage that Uki had pasted onto it. "More importantly—Yu-Yu, are you sure *you're* okay?"

"Don't worry. I'll check on him later tonight, and if the pain gets any worse or he displays any additional signs, I'll take him straight to a doctor," Senri immediately responded.

Yuto lightly touched the gauze affixed to his head with tape, checking to see if it was moist with blood or not. After confirming that it was dry, he gave a soft smile and said, "I'm okay."

"Does this happen to you often?" Ms. Komori asked. The pain showing on her face in that moment far surpassed any pain she could have felt from her injury.

"People stare at us and jeer all the time... but this is the first time anyone's actually tried to hurt us," Senri answered.

"Did you know them?" Uki asked.

Yuto shook his head. "No... They looked like they were fourth or fifth graders, and I think they live close by..." he said. He fell silent for a moment before

turning to Senri. “Hey, Big Sis? Even after everything they did... I didn’t say anything bad to them...”

“Huh?” Senri said, confused.

“When they were running away, they were saying a lot of really mean things about Takuru... but even after that, I promise I didn’t say anything bad to them...” Looking at Senri, Yuto clarified what he meant. Tears could be seen forming in his eyes.

Trying her best not to graze his injury, Senri gently patted Yuto on the head. “I’m proud of you.” Leaning into her hand, Yuto wiped his eyes. Uki gave him a slow, approving nod; while her anger may have been at a boiling point on the inside, it had been superseded by just how proud she was of her brother.

“Why do you do it?” Ms. Komori broke the silence. Her eyes drifted between the three children. “How can you all be so mature about all this? They do all these horrible things to you, but you just take it on the chin like it’s nothing—and you don’t even complain! I thought you were supposed to be children? Why are you being adults here? Because as far as I’m concerned, if I were your age, I would probably lose i— Actually, no, even now as an adult, I would *still* lose it. So why? Why do you let them get away with all this?”

Ms. Komori fell silent again. Eventually, her eyes drifted to the empty seat at the table. “Does it have something to do with him? Is he the reason you all just grin and bear it, even when you’re crying your eyes out over how badly it hurts? Does he matter that much to you?”

The question loomed over Uki’s head; from the way Ms. Komori had phrased it, her concern over the three children was too great for any of them to dismiss her question with the same, “It’s none of your business,” as before. And yet, Uki had the feeling that, no matter how they answered, Ms. Komori would use it as her opportunity to pry further; because of this, the suffocating quiet only grew.

Eventually, Senri was the one to break the silence. “You know, I didn’t use to be very good with words,” she said with a pained smile; it was clear she felt she had no other choice but to speak. Uki and Yuto looked at her in slight surprise.

“Ms. Komori, what do you think it means to be an adult?” she asked.

“Huh?” Ms. Komori said.

“As you already know, the three of us, as well as Takuru... and Yui, too, are all former Chaos Child Syndrome patients. I don’t know who exactly started calling the syndrome by that name, but I’m sure they were right to use the word ‘children.’ After all, all of us were, without exception, children at the time of its onset. Both physically... and mentally.”

Senri rested her hand on her chest. “It’s publicly available information that Takuru was the first to recover from CCS. And while I may not know the real reason why he managed to do so... I believe he defeated it because he became an adult. In every sense of the word. I believe, when he recovered from the syndrome, he stopped being a child... something he did before any of us could.”

“I promise you, even if you aren’t adults physically, you might as well be,” Ms. Komori said.

“I wonder...” Senri mused. “What does it truly mean to be an adult? How do you define it? Is it someone who’s over twenty years old and is legally an adult? Someone who’s financially independent? Someone who’s stopped growing physically? Someone whose mind has fully matured? If it’s any of these, then I feel that it doesn’t make any sense why Takuru was the first to recover. Takuru was a selfish, egotistical, self-important dolt who truly believed that logic triumphed over all. That boy never did anything but worry us.”

Uki gazed toward her sister; from where she was standing, she was unable to see her sister’s eyes, making it difficult for her to know what she was thinking. But, all the same, she could not take her eyes off of her.

“And yet, despite all of those shortcomings, he tried harder than anyone to do something about everything that was hurting us. It may sound strange to you, but I believe that Takuru has suffered the most out of all of us. Even as he faced so much turmoil and hurt as he chased those cases... in the midst of it all, he still did his best to be kind to us. So kind, and yet... so, so selfish... He never even stopped to consider what others would feel in his wake... but he went through with it all the same. That’s why...” Senri paused, searching for what words to say. She looked up at Ms. Komori and gave a sad smile.

“That’s why I believe that being an adult means struggling to be kind no matter what the world throws at you. And if that’s what it means, Takuru is more of an adult than anyone here could possibly hope to be. And we need to follow his example. We’re children, and no matter what trials we may face—no matter what the world throws at us—we *have* to become proper adults, too.”

Ms. Komori simply stared, astonished by the young girl. Having heard her answer, she no longer felt any desire to ask again the one question Senri had neglected to directly respond to: the question of whether Takuru truly mattered that much to them.

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“I’m sorry, I always hate when this comes around...” Senri said to Uki. “Call me if you need anything. I’ll make sure they let me keep my cell phone on.” And with that, Ms. Komori and Senri left Aoba Dormitory and headed for the hospital.

Senri was visiting the hospital in order for her to undergo a few tests related to CCS. Even after being discharged, patients who had previously suffered from the syndrome were required to visit every now and then for periodic examinations. While it may have been compulsory, for the purpose of assisting with research into the syndrome, Uki and the others willingly stayed overnight at the hospital once a month, where their brain waves would be monitored over the course of their sleep.

Senri was reluctant to visit due to her being worried about Yuto—even asking the hospital staff whether they could allow him to stay with her—but Yuto had

assured her that he would be fine. So, upon seeing her and Ms. Komori off, Yuto returned to his room—he was likely very tired—and Uki returned to her room soon after.

After finishing her homework, as well as ruminating for a while over whether or not she had followed the proper procedure when treating Ms. Komori's wounds, Uki went to bed. However, right as the drowsiness finally arrived, leading her to stop reading for the night, she heard a very slight moan seep through the walls.

Tearing off the covers, Uki ran to Yuto's room and knocked on the door. But there was no answer. Refusing to wait, Uki opened the door to find Yuto sitting on his bed in total darkness, cradling his knees to his chest.

"Oh no... It's all right, Yuu. I'm here..." she said softly.

It was one of the panic attacks they had all sadly grown accustomed to. Uki quickly turned on the light, sat down on the bed, and placed her arm around Yuto's shoulder, holding him close to her.

"I-I'm sorry..." he choked out.

"It's okay. You have nothing to apologize for," Uki whispered. For a moment, she considered calling Senri, but as he didn't seem to be hyperventilating or convulsing, she decided that she would be able to handle it. As long as a member of his family stayed close to him, the panic attack was unlikely to worsen; and in the unlikely event that the symptoms did grow more extreme, Uki would know what to do to help soothe them.

"It's okay, Yuu... It's okay..." Cradling his shoulder in one arm, she patted his back rhythmically, repeating those words again and again.

She looked at Yuto's hands. During a panic attack, he would always hold his elbows and pull his arms close to his chest, holding them as tight as he could. If his arms moved to his head to cover his ears, it would mean the symptoms were worsening. If his grip weakened, however, it would signal that the panic attack was subsiding.

"It's okay... Everything's going to be okay..." After about ten minutes, Uki saw his hands begin to relax, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Looking at his face, she saw that the life had returned to his unfocused, swimming eyes. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Yuto gave an uncomfortable nod. "I'm sorry... I'm okay now..." he said.

Nodding back, Uki stood up from the bed and went to leave the room. As she walked, her eyes fell upon the empty bed sitting next to Yuto's. It was the one Yui had used. The sheets had been folded up and put away, leaving the mattress bare. The white, inorganic nature of it reminded Uki of the hospital where she had been staying so long ago.

Before she could realize, her eyes had automatically started to search for a certain head of long hair.

“Uki...?” Yuto’s voice came from behind her. Following his words, the voice of Senri sounded inside Uki’s head.

“What do you think it means to be an adult?”

“Yuu...” Without her knowing it, Uki was clenching her hand so tightly, her fingernails had begun to dig into her flesh. As the pain surged from her palm, so too came a surge of resolve.

Take the first step. Don’t back down, she commanded herself.

Suddenly, Uki spoke aloud. “I know this might be hard to talk about, but... I want you to tell me more about these panic attacks you’ve been having.” Uki sat back down on his bed. “What happened during the earthquake?”

Yuto looked surprised, taken aback by how sudden this was. Uki waited silently for him to answer, and eventually, he gave a small nod. Judging from his expression, he had likely decided that there was no way around it.

“I’m sorry... If it really is too hard to talk about, you don’t have to—”

“No, it’s okay,” Yuto reassured her. “I guess I never told you what happened back then...”

Uki nodded. She had never been able to ask about his past before; it was likely something both of them had been avoiding.

Slowly, Yuto began to speak. “I don’t remember much from before the earthquake hit. Me and Yui were walking through Shibuya with Mom and Dad. I was walking next to Dad, and Yui was walking next to Mom. She was holding Mom’s hand, and I was holding Dad’s. I remember being really, really tired. Then, the earthquake happened. I fell down, and all my tiredness immediately went away. People were running every which way around us. They were screaming. I tried to stand up, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t do it.”

It must have been the panic that had occurred immediately after the earthquake had struck at 10:28 PM. At that time, many people had been situated around Shibuya Station, which was easily the area that had received the vast brunt of the damage.

“I remember the sound of windows breaking, and low, creaky sounds coming from everywhere. It was almost like there were drums everywhere,” Yuto continued. “Buildings were falling to the ground all around us. When I suddenly snapped out of it, I realized I fell down, and I wasn’t holding hands with Dad anymore—I was holding hands with Yui. People kept trampling over us, but Yui kept screaming not to let go no matter what. When the ground finally stopped shaking, I was able to actually get up... but that’s when I realized we’d gotten separated from Mom and Dad.”

“Oh, Yuu...”

“We kept yelling for them over and over again, but since so many other people were yelling too, I don’t know if they could hear us. The people surrounding us closed in around us... They were like walls... I knew we had to run away, but I didn’t know how. Suddenly, though, Yui started pulling me by my hand. She pulled me through all the people, saying that we had to find a place where there was no one else around.”

“She was so brave...” Uki murmured, and Yuto nodded. Back when the earthquake had hit, Yui had still been in the second grade, and Yuto would have been starting elementary school the very next year. She had been very young.

“I couldn’t stop crying,” Yuto continued. “But no matter what happened, she never did. No matter what happened, as we walked and walked and walked, she just kept saying to me, ‘Just keep your eyes closed, Yuu! Don’t open your eyes!’ She was protecting me... and that meant that she was seeing everything so that I didn’t have to... She couldn’t have pulled me with her if she wasn’t... and yet, I just kept crying and crying, doing nothing to help her. I couldn’t do anything...!”

“Are you all right, Yuu?” Uki’s voice was full of worry. Yuto was cradling his knees as he recalled everything that had happened; without even having to think

about it, Uki embraced him once more. But Yuto did not move.

“We were both so thirsty... and our legs were so sore... We thought they were gonna give out on us, but... right when we thought we were about to collapse, a bunch of adults showed up out of nowhere and started chasing us. They were all men. We ran away as fast as we could, and we ended up running into a building that was falling apart. It was there that Yui tried to let go of my hand for the first time. She took me to a room with a broken door, and she told me over and over again to stay there and to not move a muscle... I wanted to scream—to beg her not to let go—but my throat hurt too much... All I could do was croak... Th-That room... It was so... so dark... I...”

Uki could feel Yuto’s hands start to tremble as his fists balled tighter and tighter atop his knees. Becoming frantic now, she started to tell Yuto that he didn’t have to keep going, only for his hand to take the one of hers that was resting atop his shoulder. He squeezed it tightly.

“I stayed in that room and Yui ran away... but they followed her... I couldn’t do anything... I was too scared to move...” he continued. “A... A minute after that, I heard the men talking and grunting... and I heard her too...”

“Yuu, it’s okay... You can stop...” Uki pleaded. But Yuto did not stop.

“I couldn’t move... I knew they were right next to me... but it was so dark... I couldn’t see anything... All I could hear was the sound of her voice as she cried and cried...” he choked out. As the tears began to fall from his face, Uki hugged him as hard as she could. She could hear the sounds of him sobbing into her chest, moans of sorrow escaping from his lips. And yet, even still, his fists refused to relax.

“Sometimes... when it’s really dark... I can still hear her... She saved me... but I... I couldn’t save her... I couldn’t do anything...” As Uki embraced her sobbing brother, she realized that tears had begun to fall from her own eyes, too. Wiping away their tears with each others’ pajamas, the two children remained motionless for a while.

Now feeling the chill of the room, Uki covered herself and Yuto with a blanket, and the two of them lay down. Yuto continued to sob into Uki’s chest, but every now and then, he would call out for his sister. “Sis...” he would murmur. Each time he did, Uki would reply once, asking, “What is it?” only for her to realize that he wasn’t talking to her.

He was talking to Yui.

“Sis...”

That was all he said.

“What is it?”

That was all she said.

Yuto continued to murmur her name. Uki continued to reply in turn. The two siblings held each other until, eventually, they had grown tired from crying, and

they fell asleep in each other's arms.

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When Senri came home from the hospital early the next morning, she found herself incredibly surprised to see Uki and Yuto.

"Why do you two look so awful?" she asked, her voice full of concern.

The two siblings' eyes were swollen as could be. Turning to Uki, Yuto gave her a weak smile; smiling back, Uki gave him a short nod, then said, "No reason."

"What's this? Are you two keeping secrets from your big sister?" Senri said jokingly. Smiling happily, she did not pry any further.

Later that day, Uki had come home from school and was talking to everyone—including Ms. Komori—about their plans for dinner that night when the four received a visitor.

"Sorry to drop in on you out of the blue like this, but can I have a moment?"

Upon opening the door, the moment Uki was met with the face of their visitor, she was hit with a sudden epiphany. It was the same woman she would see every now and then at the supermarket. The same woman that had very quickly left the store after Ms. Komori had scowled at her and the other woman who had been with her.

As Uki stood frozen in shock, the woman said, "Here, it'll only be a minute," and pushed her way inside without waiting for approval. She was accompanied by a boy who looked like he was in elementary school.

After directing them to stay in the entranceway, Uki went upstairs to get Senri. When she returned with her, she realized that her sister recognized the woman too, as she frowned slightly when she first laid eyes on her.

"Can I help you?" Senri asked hesitantly.

"Oh, hello there. You must be his big sister. Don't worry, I'm just here because of something that happened between your brother and my little boy." Smiling, the woman took the hand of the boy who had been tucked behind her and brought him to her side. The boy immediately looked away upon coming out, his face showing he was clearly irritated at having to be where he was.

"You see, my little angel was playing outside yesterday, right? Well, he was throwing around a couple rocks—you know boys—and I'm afraid he accidentally hit your brother."

"Ah...!" Uki let out a gasp of surprise, and she realized that the boy was wearing some very popular clothing among his age group.

"I'm afraid there's been a mistake. Yuto said that the rock was thrown *at* him." Taking a step forward, Senri further closed the distance between herself and the woman. Her tone was calm, but Uki saw that her hands were clenched into fists.

"Well, like I said, my little boy was just playing. He didn't mean to. Isn't that

right, dear?" She craned her neck to look down beside her at the boy, and he gave a somewhat apologetic nod. His hands were jammed deep inside his pockets.

"Although, really, this is just how children are," she continued. "Boys will be boys, you know? Honestly, I don't even believe we had to go to the trouble of talking it out like this... We're all adults here, and it's not really that big of a deal, now is it?"

"I'm afraid I'm not following," said Senri.

"Well, *like I said*, I don't really think it's that big of a deal."

"I'm sorry. I still don't understand. *What* isn't a big deal?"

The smile immediately fell from the woman's face, replaced by a fierce glare. The spark of contempt could clearly be seen in her eyes. *"Who on earth do you think you are?"* they screamed at Senri.

"Hmph. Well, either way, I'd appreciate it if you didn't go and make a fuss about all this."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Oh, you know, silly things like... telling the hospital staff. If we could just keep this between us, that'd be just wonderful."

"So if I'm understanding you correctly, you want me to ignore the fact that your son deliberately pelted my brother in the face with a rock?"

"Oh, please. He was just playing around. He didn't mean to actually hit him."

Uki's anger was growing fiercer and fiercer, but right as she was about to let her rage fly, Senri signaled her to stop with her hand. It was trembling.

Senri took a deep breath; it must have been taking everything she had to keep her emotions in check. "I don't intend to tell anyone else about this. All I want is for him to please apologize to my brother."

"And why would he need to do that? He was just playing around, as boys do."

"Please apologize to my brother," Senri repeated.

The woman moved in closer. "My word, why are you being so hysterical? Is this not embarrassing for you? Acting like such a child over boys horsing around..."

"APOLOGIZE!"

An angry shout sounded from behind Senri. It was Ms. Komori.

Holding Yuto's hand in her own, she stomped over to the woman and stood right in front of her. "I was right there with him," she said. "It's clear to me that your son very intentionally threw a stone at Yuto. Apologize this instant."

"Well, I never... Is there any reason to be such an insufferable drama queen?"

"If that rock had been aimed just a little bit lower, he could have lost an eye! Apologize! NOW!"

The woman flinched in response to Ms. Komori's menacing look, but it didn't take long for her to break into a mocking smile. "And who are you? Are you their caregiver or guardian or something?"

"I am."

"Oh, honey... I know this is your job, but I'm afraid you need to tone it down a notch. Getting all heated over such nonsense like whether or not it was intentional or how he 'could've lost an eye' is just silly. It's unbecoming, really. Besides, at the end of the day, whether or not you get one little apology is inconsequential." As she spoke, the woman's smile curved deeper, and she patted Ms. Komori on the shoulder. It was clear she expected the caregiver to agree with her. "All right, then... If it'll make you happy, I suppose I owe you an apology, Miss."

"Oh, for God's sake... I'm not the one you need to apologize to," Ms. Komori said. With a large sigh, she turned to look back at Uki and the others. For a moment, she simply stared at them without saying a word; it was as if she was trying to convince herself of something. Uki, too, did not say a word.

Eventually, Ms. Komori scratched her head in resignation and said, "Looks like it's come to this." She turned around to face the woman once again. "If you do not apologize to Yuto right now, I will be filing a police report."

"Excuse me?" the woman responded, indignant.

"What your son did was blatant battery. I would like all of his information; I need his name, his age, and your address."

"Y-You can't be serious."

"I'm afraid I am." Reaching into her jacket pocket, Ms. Komori retrieved a badge and held it out to the woman. "My name is Officer Komori from the Community Safety Division of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. I preside over all juvenile crimes that happen in this region. And now that I have your attention, I must inform you that what your son did was undeniably a criminal act and thus falls under my jurisdiction."

The woman was completely dumbfounded. Her eyes were as wide as dinner plates as she stared at the woman's police badge. Uki was not spared from this surprise, either; Yuto, too, looked up at Ms. Komori in shock.

"If you don't believe me, I'll give you my business card and you can contact me via the number written on there. Now, as I already said, I need your son's name, age, as well as your address."

"D-Dear, apologize. Now." The woman stammered, poking her son in the shoulder. The boy, perhaps intimidated by Ms. Komori's sudden change in demeanor, immediately tore his hands out of his pockets, bowed his head, then quickly mumbled, "I'm sorry..."

"Not to me! To Yuto!" Ms. Komori ordered.

The boy snapped to face Yuto, keeping his head bowed. "I-I'm sorry!"

Yuto struggled to find a response to give to him—but rather than being unable to reply due to him still harboring some intense feelings, he seemed far more bewildered than anything.

After a few seconds, the boy raised his head—but the moment he did, Ms. Komori suddenly grabbed him by the collar of his modish shirt and immediately pulled him toward her. Glaring daggers at him from point-blank, she spoke. “Now listen closely, you little punk. I know your face. If you even *think* of doing anything like this again, I’ll throw you in juvie the second I get my hands on you. So you better be on your best behavior. Got it?”

And with that, the entire house fell silent.

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The sound of a simmering pot bubbling and boiling atop the kotatsu echoed throughout the living room. Situated around the heated table, Ms. Komori and the rest of Aoba Dormitory sat silently; they would have eaten at the dinner table, but Ms. Komori had said that there was no need, as her knee was doing much better—but that was the last real word that had been said in a long time.

Aside from the occasional skimming of the scum that bubbled to the top of the pot by Senri—whenever she managed to remember to do so—not a thing moved in the room.

“Right, so... uh... Huh. I... uh...” Ms. Komori continually tried to speak, only for her words to fail her each and every time. She glanced at Uki and the others awkwardly, but whenever she met their eyes, they always looked away right after. Deeply uncomfortable, Uki looked toward Yuto, only to be met with a gaze that was clearly just as uncomfortable as hers.

Eventually, Senri turned off the stove, perhaps having come to the conclusion that it had all been simmering for far too long. Then, she let out a loud, exaggerated sigh, as if reluctant to do what she had to do.

“Komori Ayumi. Twenty-eight years old. Single. Occupation: Officer from the Community Safety Division of the TMPD. City of residence: Saitama,” she said.

“Huh?” The voices of the three others in the room all sounded in unison.

“After obtaining her caregiver certification at a junior college, Komori moved to Tokyo to work at a preschool. Upon turning twenty-five, she retired from education and turned her focus to the police force. She then passed the background check and all other tests, and due to her qualifications and previous experience at the preschool, she was assigned to the Community Safety Division.”

As Senri continued to speak as if she were reading out official documentation on Ms. Komori, the caregiver’s face stiffened. “U-Um, what are you doing, Senny...?”

“The purpose of Ms. Komori being assigned to Aoba Dormitory is threefold. First, she is to work there as a caregiver. Second, she is to protect the family of the perpetrator, fulfilling her job as a police officer. Third, and most

importantly…" Senri hesitated for a moment. "She is to mine the family for any information related to Miyashiro, as well as search for any possible evidence that may assist with his sentencing. When the time comes for the prosecutors to decide on their plea, we want them to have plenty of evidence to achieve their desired verdict."

"Verdicts… Like life imprisonment? Or… even worse?" Yuto asked, his aspirations of becoming a lawyer obvious to see.

Senri merely shook her head; she did not know the answer. "It's not an easy case to try," she said. "That's why Ms. Komori took the printout of the ledger, searched our room, pressed our neighbor for information on our father, and who knows what else."

"W-Wow… Looks like I was pretty sloppy…" Hiding herself behind her hands, Ms. Komori groaned as she spoke. "When did you find out?"

"Yuto first found out about you searching our house and interrogating our neighbor about a week ago. As for you being a police officer—two days ago," Senri explained. "I apologize for going behind your back, but we overheard a suspicious phone call between you and some unknown person the other day, so I had the call investigated. It was only this morning that I received a detailed profile on you, as well as your objectives in coming here."

"Oh god… You didn't get ahold of Detective Shinjo, did you? From the Shibuya Police Department?"

Senri nodded. Takeshi Shinjo was a detective who had greatly assisted Uki and the others over the course of the case. According to Senri, she had contacted him the night that she had overheard Ms. Komori's phone call while in the imaging room, and she had asked him if he could investigate the caregiver. It hadn't taken long for him to find out that she was from the TMPD, and he had shared both this information as well as everything else he had learned with Senri at the hospital during her stay the previous night.

"So she wasn't a reporter…" Yuto muttered to himself in dismay. To this, Ms. Komori smiled a wry smile. *"Was that what I seemed like to you?"* it seemed to say.

Upon seeing this, Senri smiled in much the same manner. She then turned to Ms. Komori. "All right, then. Here's what's going to happen," she began. "After you left late this evening, I planned to tell Yuto and Uki about the profile I had gotten from Detective Shinjo, and then we were all going to keep quiet about it. It was never my intention to tell you that we knew who you were."

"Fair enough, I suppose…" Ms. Komori said.

"The only reason I'm telling you this at all is because you yourself told us that you're a member of the police. However, that's precisely what confuses me. Why *did* you do that?"

"Because that mom and her kid really got to me. *Especially* that mom. I mean, you saw how she acted… I can't believe there's people who are actually like that! Imagine being that unbelievably awful!" Clearly upset by this memory, Ms.

Komori's fist crashed down on the top of the table; her answer had been quick, requiring little thought. Perhaps it was because her true identity had already been revealed, but she was hiding very little of her true feelings now.

Uki's and Yuto's gazes fluttered about the room, their unfocus coming from half astonishment and half concern.

Senri smiled wryly once again. "I also heard that you're known for being... aggressive, to say the least. One time, when catching a group of young boys who had been shaking down other people for money, you went a little too far, to the point where you had to write a formal apology to the families. And this happened not once, but twice."

"What?! How do you even know about that?!" Ms. Komori exclaimed, her face turning a bright scarlet.

Uki and Yuto, now growing a bit frightened, began to slowly sidle farther and farther away from Ms. Komori so that her eye wouldn't land on them next.

"Okay," Ms. Komori said. Then, she took a breath. "Yesterday, you asked me something, Senny. You asked me, 'What do you think it means to be an adult?'"

"Mhm."

"Well, I've never really thought about it before I met you all... Seeing you all be the best people you can be, even though you're just kids... yet here I am, the adult in this situation, sneaking around the place, hiding my true identity, and rifling through your drawers and cabinets. What the hell is wrong with me?"

Hearing Ms. Komori's despairful self-deprecation, a smile rose to Senri's lips, which in turn brought Uki and Yuto to smile as well. "That is a pretty interesting way to view the situation," Senri said with a laugh.

"Well, we've already come this far, so I might as well ask: Do you know anything about the case?" Ms. Komori asked.

"Nothing beyond what I told the police during the investigation."

"And does that extend to Uki and Yuto?"

The two younger children nodded.

"Well, my boss still thinks that you and Detective Shinjo know something you're not telling us. And while I've never met the detective, I've spent more than enough time with you three to know that he's probably right. So, are you really sure you don't know anything?"

"I'm sure," Senri enunciated, and Uki and Yuto immediately followed suit with two quick nods. Ms. Komori examined each of their faces, trying to gauge whether or not they were telling the truth; but when not a single one of them averted their eyes, it didn't take long for her to relent. "All right. I get the picture now," she muttered.

Senri relit the stove, heating up the dish she was preparing once more. "Well, now that that's settled, I think it's time to eat," she said.

“Huh...?” Ms. Komori said, looking at Senri in surprise. “You... You still want me here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Aren’t you going to kick me out?”

“I wasn’t aware I had that kind of power around here. You’re our certified caregiver, are you not?”

“I guess so...”

“Besides, even if I did have that kind of power, I want to make it clear that I really do appreciate what you did today. To be honest with you, if you hadn’t grabbed the little snot by the collar first, I would’ve done it myself.”

Senri then placed a short hold on the conversation, instead turning her attention to preparing a bowl of food for Ms. Komori. She then held it out to the caregiver.

Ms. Komori looked at Uki and the others, her eyes asking one more time, *“Are you really sure about this?”* before eventually, she accepted the bowl with a bashful look on her face.

At that moment, a thought came to Uki—a thought she would soon voice. A thought that should have been well formulated—deliberated on for hours and hours, days and days, and yet, it came out of her mouth as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“If you’re going to eat with us, Ms. Komori, then you need to scoot over. That’s where Yuu sits,” she said without a hint of hesitation. Three pairs of eyes immediately trained on her, all wide as could be. Instead of meeting their gazes one by one, however, she returned only Yuu’s. “Is that fine with you, Yuu?” she asked.

“Sure,” Yuto said; he too had spoken without a hint of hesitation. Withdrawing his feet from beside Senri, he moved over to his original spot. Ms. Komori, who had just been ousted from where she had been sitting, was now standing in front of the seat opposite to Senri.

“Is it okay if she sits there, Senri?” Uki asked. Senri, having been caught in a bit of a stupor, didn’t reply for a moment—but it wasn’t long before her look of surprise shifted to a soft, tender smile. *“Oh, what am I going to do with you...”* it said.

She sighed and shook her head in faux exasperation. “I knew it. I *knew* something happened last night between you two,” Senri said. Her voice sounded as happy as could be; Ms. Komori, meanwhile, had no idea what was going on. Paying this no heed, Senri urged her to sit down, and she quietly did so.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Ms. Komori asked, hopelessly confused.

“Ms. Komori? Just so you know, if we’re talking about who’s more of an adult among us, Uki is far, far more mature than I am.”

“What? How? You’re already so mature... How can I be...?” Uki said, trailing off.

Talking happily around the table, each of the family members served themselves, picking out their individual favorites from the hotpot in the center.

As she ate, Uki looked at the faces of the people surrounding her, and a question came to mind. “Would you all like to go to the Ueno Zoo this weekend?”

The sudden suggestion made the three pairs of chopsticks stop in place.

“Well, sure, we can do that,” Senri replied. “Is it because you want to see the pandas?”

Uki shook her head.

“No, I just want to go. I’ve never been... and I’ve always wanted to know what it’s like.”

Interlude 1

Minamisawa Senri

Dear Takuru,

The very evening we were slated to go to the zoo, it started raining something fierce. But we didn't let that stop us. And not only did we not let that stop us, but we managed to go to each and every one of the exhibits we wanted to. Uki had wanted to go for so long, so I'm glad we were able to make that happen for her.

To tell you the truth, I had actually never been there before. Have you? Well, if you do intend to take a trip sometime, be warned: if you have any desire to see the pandas, you need to go either right when the park opens, or during feeding time. Otherwise, they'll most likely be sleeping—and even if they aren't, they might as well be for how languid the little things are. They didn't even so much as look at us while we were there!

Reflecting on our trip now, though, I must say that I think the rabbits are what left the biggest impression on me. We were even able to pet them. I already knew before how cute rabbits were, but I never *really* knew until then. They're adorable... Ever since that day, Uki and Yuto have been taking turns asking me if we can get one for ourselves. The two of them have these mechanical pencils with the cutest little bunny heads on the ends, and one day while we were all getting some work done, they just kept glancing between those little bunnies and me. I must say, their plan of attack has proved quite effective on me... To be honest, I'm not sure how much longer I can keep fighting back—not for a lack of trying, mind you, it just feels like it's only a matter of time until I cave...

Well, on another note, I have some good news to share with you. For the last several weeks, Yuto hasn't had a single panic attack. It hasn't been long enough that I can confidently say he's fully recovered, but it's clear to see that everyone has been feeling very hopeful. This is unquestionably a good sign, and you can see that in just how much he's brightened up recently.

On a related note, it seems like something happened between him and Uki, but he won't tell me what it was. And I was under the impression we had a certain family motto saying that there weren't supposed to be any secrets between us...

Well, no sense dwelling on it—I already have a fairly good idea of what it was, anyway.

Watching the two of them recently, I was reminded of when you first arrived at the dormitory—back when you were still in your coma and I was taking care of you while you slept. I think the reason it came to mind is because Uki is trying her utmost to be the best, most supportive sister she can be... just as I was when I had you.

I still remember how terrified I was when I clipped your nails for the first time—I was so scared that I would hurt you somehow, or perhaps cut them too short... but I was the eldest sibling in that house—your older sister—so I fought back my fears and did what I had to do.

I'm sure you understand what exactly I mean by these words... but I won't

doubt that, in my actions back then, there was more than likely quite a bit of my own self-deception seeping into my caring for you.

I used you, Takuru. And I couldn't be more sorry for that.

Uki is doing well. She'll be a better older sister to Yuto than I could ever be.

Oh, while I'm thinking of it, I'd like to say something to you about that time. I know you always avoid the topic whenever we talk about your coma, but I'd like to truly apologize for having to be the one to take care of the more... private matters, i.e., anything involving the dreaded bedpan. That would be embarrassing for anybody, let alone a boy of your age... so I'm sorry. I realize it had to be done, but I at least wish it didn't have to be so uncomfortable... I hope you accept my sincerest of apologies.

As for Ms. Komori—our caregiver that I informed you about in a previous letter—I'm afraid I can't divulge any more about her than I already have, but she's also doing well. Please don't worry about her, nor how we're doing with a new person around the house. She may be a bit quick-tempered, as well as *very* competitive, but she is an excellent caregiver to us all. I'm sure she will keep Uki and Yuto safe and well cared for.

When it comes to the housework, the three of us have returned to our original chores that we used to do prior to Ms. Komori arriving. She already has more than enough on her plate, so we all felt far too uncomfortable letting her continue doing everything for us. A bit of mutiny never hurt anybody.

When it comes to meals, I'm still always the one who takes the lead. Ms. Komori has been practicing her cooking so she can compete with Uki, but I'm afraid the two of them have a little while left to go before I let them take the reins. The two of them often say that the bar has been set incredibly high for them because of me, but... well, while Uki may fare a bit better, I believe that Ms. Komori would fall a bit short even if she sought out a different judge. I just can't for the life of me figure out how she managed to cut her hand making a hard-boiled egg... Surely you understand how difficult that is, right?

Oh, yes, I should update you on the kotatsu. I mentioned before that Arimura and Kazuki were planning to buy some legless chairs, but fortunately for me, neither of them ended up doing so. *Un*fortunately, Ms. Komori *did*... and just as I predicted would happen, everyone has taken their near-permanent spots beneath the kotatsu. If they had their way, they'd never have to leave.

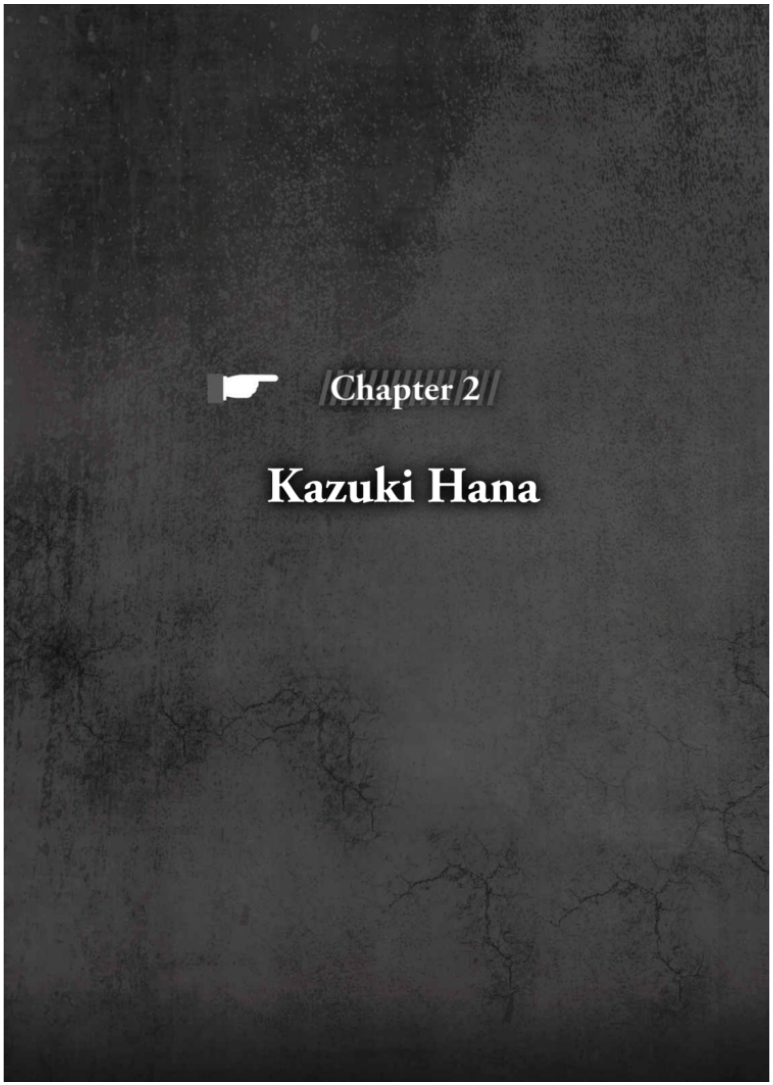
Regardless, I've made sure to stay on their cases, as it's clear to me that if I don't continue with my interventions, those two won't even let me put the thing away come springtime.

Well, as I'm sure you know, it's still very chilly outside. Please take care of yourself—I don't want you catching a cold.

I will be writing to you again.

Sincerely,

Minamisawa Senri


Chapter 2
Kazuki Hana

Kazuki Hana sat alone in her classroom; immersed in her handheld video game, she was enjoying her break time to the fullest when, suddenly, she was approached by a female student.

“Um, is that the game that came out yesterday?” the girl said to her.

The girl had large, red-rimmed glasses and straight black hair that reached down to her chest. Hana had a slight feeling she had seen her somewhere before, but she found herself unable to place her; at the very least, she knew that they were not in the same class and that they had never spoken to one another.

In response to the girl’s question, Hana nodded, puzzled by the sudden nature of her approach. The girl was correct—the game she was playing had only been released the day prior.

“It’s completely sold out at the game store I usually go to...” the girl continued. “How are the load times compared to the last port? Did they make the UI actually readable?”

Is she a gamer, too? Hana wondered to herself. She then answered aloud. “Mm... The load times are pretty much the same. The UI’s been simplified and feels more user-friendly than before, though.”

The girl nodded, then quickly moved in close to Hana. “My name’s Hatsuyama. Hatsuyama Mizuki. I’m from the next class over. Sorry for coming up to you out of the blue like this, but I swear I’ve got a good reason,” she said. “Okay, basically, I dunno where exactly I heard this from, but do you play ESO2, Kazuki?”

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A few hours passed, and the school day had come to a close. Hana was chatting with Hinae, and upon mentioning to her that a girl had come up to her during break that day, Hinae aggressively shot forward in her seat, her eyes as wide as dinner plates. After the initial shock had subsided, Hinae retreated back to her normal position, placed both elbows on her desk, rested her chin in her hands, and simply looked at Hana for a few moments, as if observing some strange, unknowable phenomena. A few moments of silence passed, but eventually, she happily asked for details.

The two girls were located in what had become their home away from home: the former Newspaper Club room. The club itself had been suspended indefinitely after the Return of the New Generation Madness had concluded; this was because Takuru, the person who was believed to be the culprit behind the case, had been the club’s president. For this reason, the club had not been operating normally for quite some time, but this did not stop its members from continuing to frequent the clubroom as if nothing had changed at all.

The school rules stated that students were required to participate in some form of extracurricular activities, and with the suspension of the Newspaper Club, Hana was left adrift. She was the only member who had no other extracurricular

obligations, and thus, she would have to find another club or committee to join. She had yet to decide on another place to go, so in the meantime, she simply stuck to visiting the Newspaper Club room after school.

“Well? Why not go? I mean, all you and I were gonna do was just walk around, maybe stop in a few stores here and there... I don’t care all that much if we don’t go this time,” Hinae said. “Besides, you’d totally suck if you turned her down after she went way out of her comfort zone to ask you out like that.”

“Stop talking about it like it’s a date,” Hana replied, annoyed.

“Look at you—getting all caught up by silly little things like *gender*. Are you seriously gonna miss out on this because of a dumb reason like that?”

Earlier, Hana had received an invitation from the girl named Hatsuyama to spend some time together with her the following day. The destination she had in mind was a manga café in Ebisu; if the two of them rented a private room via the double-pack plan and played ESO2 on the café computers, they would receive an exclusive buff to item drop rates offered only at that particular location.

ESO2 was an MMORPG that Hana had been playing for several years; Hatsuyama was also an avid player. However, even though the idea was sound, Hana already had plans with Hinae, and she had thus declined the invitation.

“Mm... maybe it’s true that I could get some pretty great loot, but I’d be in a party with her, which means I’d have to roll for it. If I lose the roll, it’ll all be pointless. Besides, judging from her gear, she’s the type of person to rush in and do a massive pull. That’d make for good peel, but it doesn’t really work with my playstyle since I need someone to spam me with buffs... Even if we did synergize well, I haven’t been hopping on the game that much recently anyway...”

“Okay, Hana, real talk? I have literally no idea what you’re talking about. Mommy’s lost.”

“That’s your fault for not listening. I don’t know how many tutorials I’ve given you at this point.”

“And *I* don’t know how many times I’ve told *you* that I don’t *want* to know your weird gamer words!” Hinae said exasperatedly, her head falling back over the back of her seat. Then, after staring at the ceiling for a second, she snapped back forward to look at Hana again. “But seriously, why don’t you go? I really don’t mind.”

“I know, but... I’ve barely even talked to her...” Hana said.

“You’ve barely even talked to *anybody*.”

Hana’s words caught in her throat.

Following a certain event in her life, ever since the seventh grade, Hana had been living a life of almost absolute silence; save for a few spare words here or there, she hardly spoke at all. As of recent, however, there was no longer any reason to keep her speech to a minimum, and as such, she had been able to hold normal conversations with Hinae, Senri, and the other people related to the

Newspaper Club. Yet, when it came to her other classmates, as well as strangers in general, she still found herself unable to find any words; this was not helped by the fact that she was already over six months into her first year of high school and she still had not spoken to a single one of her classmates. She never faced bullying or anything along those lines, but no one sought her friendship, either. Because of this, she would tend to keep to herself—and this isolating tendency had continued even after school had resumed.

"There's a pretty good chance that she'll be the one to do the talking, though. I dunno if starting off at the manga café is a great first date idea, but I mean, you're both gamers or whatever, so why not? You'll be fine. Probably," Hinae said.

"You want me to do it pretty bad, huh...?" Hana replied, growing increasingly suspicious.

"Uh, of course I do? After all, a great woman once said, 'If you neglect to make more friends now, you'll have far greater trouble doing it later.'"

"Who the heck said that?"

"The great philosopher Minamisawa Senri."

Hana sighed. Then again, now that Hinae had mentioned it, she did feel like she had heard that from Senri before.

"And for your information, I agree with her. You gotta make some friends, Hana," Hinae said. "Just think of it like this. It's like... Everyone here's all in the same boat—*especially* the kids at this school. We've all got similar struggles, so I'm sure you can find some people that'll click with you."

Hatsuyama's face appeared in Hana's mind.

"I guess," she answered reluctantly.

Whether they were high schoolers or middle schoolers, the students attending Hekiho Academy had all been Chaos Child Syndrome patients at some point in their lives; a not-insignificant number of the student body was still hospitalized or had not been able to return to school due to the severe mental ailments they were facing as a result of the syndrome. Those who *were* currently attending—students like Hana and the others—were those who had managed to overcome the symptoms and rejoin society. Even among those who had recovered, however, each and every one of the students faced all manner of negativity, from individuals and groups who were prejudiced against them to those who simply did not understand them or their affliction. Only those who attended the academy could understand the pain the students went through on a daily basis.

"You have a lot of friends, don't you, Hina?" Hana said.

"Well, yeah, I'd make a pretty sucky mentor if I didn't. If you want someone to teach you how to tell people exactly what they wanna hear, I'm your girl. So, if you want my advice: listen to that girl's advice," Hinae replied snarkily. "I'll just go ahead and say this now—you know how people like to say, 'Friends are born, not made—so I'm still looking'? Well, that might sound good and all, but the people who say that tend to count random-ass people they talk to in the hallway

or at the park or whatever as friends. Repeat after me—and say this with your whole, *biiig* chest: 'Friends are totally something you make.'"

Rather than repeating after her, Hana frowned instead, doubting her friend's advice. *Is that really true?* she wondered, only for Hinae to reply with a nod to the effect of, *"It's totally true."*

"Then again, I'm not gonna hand over my position as your best friend easily. I won't go down without a fight," Hinae said.

"'Best friend'? You?"

"Ouch... You could at least *look* like you're joking if you're not gonna sound like it..." Sulking, Hinae took out a sheet of paper from her bag and handed it to Hana. "Here. The Lit Club had some extras."

It was a blank club sign-up form; Hinae was currently the president of the Literature Club, hence why she had extra to spare. "You still haven't decided on what club to join, right? She hasn't said anything about it, but it sounds like the teachers are really hounding Senri about getting you in one," she said.

Hana nodded guiltily.

Recently, Senri, the vice president of the now-defunct Newspaper Club, had been told by the staff that she had to decide quickly on a new club or committee for Hana to join. And yet, despite her constantly being pressured, Senri had never once done the same to Hana. Senri knew better than anyone the circumstances surrounding the Newspaper Club; she understood exactly why Hana couldn't make the decision to migrate clubs so readily.

In other words, Hana was being given a great deal of grace—something she was very much aware of. Senri was not the sole person granting her said grace, however—she was certainly the biggest contributor, of course, but there was one other person: a boy who had not only given her freedom to choose her extracurricular activities for herself, but the opportunity to go to school at all. These things would seem so trivial—so normal—to anyone else, but to her, it was something irreplaceably precious.

"If there's nothing you're interested in club-wise, then you could always go for the student council with Senri. And of course, if you want in the Lit Club, then you're in," Hinae said.

"Is the Literature Club even active right now?" Hana asked.

Ever since school had resumed, Hinae had been coming to the Newspaper Club room almost every day; this, of course, gave the impression that, even if her club was active, she was far from an active participant in it.

"Uh, rude? Of course we're active," Hinae said. "Like, even if we ignore how crazy things've been, we still read, like, two books a week at minimum... Though we've all def got writer's block—you're right about that much." Hinae pulled out a hardcover book from her bag—a recent bestseller—and showed it to Hana. It was indeed a different book than the one she had shown Hana the other day; she must have finished reading that one.

“Anyway, quit changing the subject. You *really* should go tomorrow,” Hinae continued. “A wise man once said, ‘Intelligent people are always the best encyclopedia.’ I don’t know anything about this girl, but, like, if a picture can be worth a thousand words, then making a new friend is worth, like, a thousand books.”

Hana was taken aback; she never would have expected a member of the Literature Club to say something like that. “Was that also a quote from Senri?” she asked.

“Nah. Che Guevara. Or was it Napoleon? Well, whatever. Some revolutionary from some country, I dunno.”

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When Hana arrived home that night, she looked up the quote Hinae had recanted to her, only to find that it was attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Upon learning this, she texted Hinae saying, “That quote was from Goethe, not some revolutionary,” and, in less than a minute, Hana’s phone rang.

“O-Okay, Goethe might as *well* be a revolutionary! He was pretty revolutionary, right? I don’t know, I only read *Sorrows*! So, whatever! Get off my back! Adiós gracias!” Hinae’s voice spat through the receiver, and, before Hana could even get a word in, she hung up.

She’s probably right, though… Hana thought to herself. *Even if I read an entire library full of books… it’ll never make me feel like a good friend like her makes me feel.*

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The next day, when Hana told Hatsuyama that she would be going to the manga café with her, the girl practically jumped for joy. After the final bell for the day rang, the two girls went back to their respective homes and changed out of their uniforms, then met in front of Ebisu Station.

Departing for the café, Hatsuyama began to tell Hana about her experience playing ESO2. Her tone fairly peppy, Hatsuyama explained that she hadn’t been playing for an awfully long time—only about three months; she had started shortly after being discharged from the hospital following her CCS rehabilitation. She talked about the game’s dungeons, skills, and various other mechanics, all while Hana simply listened, responding with occasional nods and “mmm”s. The girl’s thoughts reminded Hana of when she herself had first started playing ESO2.

The manga café was a short walk from the train station. As it was a place she had never been before, she had to register with the employee at the front. When she presented her student ID to him so he could make a copy of it, however, he took a very conspicuous glance at her face. Nevertheless, despite the rudeness of the act, Hana simply brushed it off, thinking of it as nothing beyond the usual.

Much to Hana’s surprise, Hatsuyama also seemed to have never visited the café before, as she, too, handed off her student ID in order to register.

The private room included with the double pack was incredibly simple, including only a desk at the end of the room and two mats laid out on the floor. The door was completely airtight, and the walls soundproof, leaving the room with an atmosphere that was more than a little oppressive; however, as the amount of space provided was just enough for friends or couples to comfortably talk to one another, this oppressive air would often be dispelled fairly quickly.

As Hana turned on the computers in order to inspect their specifications, Hatsuyama broke the silence. “I guess I should be used to it by now...” she said.

“What, you mean, to rooms like this?” Hana asked.

“Oh, uh... no, I mean the guy at the counter. Does it not... bother you?”

Hana gave a soft nod, conveying the simple sentiment, *“It does.”* The only reason she had not reacted before was that she was simply used to it; as she was a student of Hekiho Academy, not a day would go by without her receiving all manner of strange looks from those around her. During her time spent in the hospital for rehab, it had happened enough for her to grow numb to it. She was often visited by the media there, with them always somehow managing to slip through the gaps in the hospital’s security; they knew Hana was a member of the same club as Takuru, so each time they found their way inside, they would invade her room in order to bombard her with questions. Even to this day, Hana did not know where they had gotten that information from.

“I... I still haven’t gotten used to it. In all honesty, I don’t think I ever will,” Hatsuyama said.

“Is that why you wanted to change before we came here?” Hana asked.

It would have been quicker for the two girls to have come directly to the manga café after school, but Hatsuyama had told Hana that she wanted to go back home first.

Hatsuyama nodded shyly. “It feels like I get noticed way more often when I’m wearing my uniform. Although, now that I think about it, I guess it didn’t really matter that I changed, since I had to give them my student ID to register and all.”

Upon finishing her inspection, Hana found that the computers would be perfectly sufficient to run a two-player session of ESO2—although this wasn’t much of a surprise considering the café was running a campaign and everything.

The two girls sat down side by side. As they faced the boot-up screen for ESO2, Hana felt a strange, warm sensation run through her. While yes, playing an MMO right next to another person was certainly a joy, what truly heartened her was the realization that Hatsuyama was the first person she had ever met who played video games like she did. She had met others online, of course, but never in person before.

For some reason she could not discern, the silence that Hana should have been accustomed to after so many years of it now felt terribly, terribly uncomfortable; for this reason, for the very first time, Hana was the first to speak. “Th-That reminds me... How did you know I played ESO2?” she asked, her voice trembling.

Hana wondered why she had only grown nervous now; she certainly hadn't been before.

"Oh, uh, I just overheard you talking about it with the student council president in the hallway the other day. Sorry, I guess it was kind of random, huh?" Hatsuyama replied awkwardly.

"O-Oh... I do remember talking to her in the hall, yeah."

As for who the student council president was, it was Senri—the same girl who, whenever she saw Hana, would always give her the same exasperated rebuke: *"Hana... You can't just play video games forever, you know."*

"So, uh... what's our quest objective?" Hatsuyama asked.

"Oh, right. We're going to the Dungeon of Xanadu," Hana replied.

The quest the two were doing was one that took place at around the mid-to-late stages in the currently available main story progression. Hana had completed it a fairly long time ago, and the four alternate characters she was working on separate from her main one had also completed it, albeit far more recently. When she told Hatsuyama this, the girl hesitated for a few moments. Then, she made a proposition.

"Hmm... If it's okay with you, do you think we could start over from the beginning?" she suggested.

"Wait, what?"

"How about we both make a new character and start from level 1?"

Due to her nervousness, Hana had not considered the fact that the two of them were severely far apart in levels. "S-Sure... I guess that would maybe make the level gap not an issue..." she said.

A joyful smile formed on Hatsuyama's face.

Upon the creation of the two's characters, Hana was suddenly hit with a wave of appreciation for the sheer novelty of her situation. Even though she was more than familiar with the entirety of ESO2's map, storyline, mobs, and characters, this was the first time she had ever made a character set to a fixed, two-person party; it was an entirely new experience for her.

As the two played side by side, Hana discovered that, even when compared against herself, a girl who played the game every day, Hatsuyama was still a fairly decent player. As well as this, Hana was used to relying entirely on the game's built-in chat function for communication, but now that she was sitting next to someone in real life, she gained a great appreciation for the efficiency provided by simply talking out loud to her fellow party member.

As they continued their conquest, Hatsuyama asked Hana about a wide variety of topics: she asked her about ESO2, a number of other video games, and Hana's class. At first, Hana found that the barrage of questions made it difficult for her to overcome her nervousness, but eventually, she found herself growing accustomed to it, and she began to relax.

In her mind, it was a sensation similar to one she had not felt in a long time. Back before the earthquake, when Hana had been able to speak normally, she would have ordinary conversations with her friends, talking about nothing for hours—just like everyone else around her did. These conversations hadn't been like the ones she shared with Senri, Hinae, and the others—they were a special type she had used to have only with people whom she had been equally close to. People who had not known anything about the case, nor the reason why Hana had been forced to stay silent.

Hana harbored a deep longing for that time in her life, but as she spoke to Hatsuyama, she thought to herself, *Maybe this is how it felt to talk to my friends back then...*

When that thought ran through her mind, Hana realized that she was thinking about those times as if she wasn't the very person who had lived them. A pained smile rose to her lips.

"Hey, Kazuki? Were you in any clubs or anything back in middle school?" Hatsuyama asked, interrupting her thoughts.

The question had caught her off guard, leaving her at a loss for words for a few moments. Trying her best not to let her distress show, she answered. "I was in the Kendo Club, maybe."

"What do you mean, 'maybe'?"

"Er, not maybe... I just mean I was only kind of in it. I quit after less than a year."

Hatsuyama's voice grew distant.

"Huh, didn't expect that."

A response that held little meaning resounded from far away.

Hana was doing everything in her power to focus her attention on the monitor in front of her. Whenever she remembered her time in the Kendo Club, something else always came to mind. *Someone* else.

It was a friend of hers. A girl that had been in the same grade as her, as well as in the Kendo Club with her. The two of them had been very close—so close, in fact, they might as well have been sisters. Their friendship had begun after the two met in that very club, and even though they had been in separate classes, the two had been practically inseparable.

However, not long after the two met, the girl's family suddenly fell to pieces. Her father committed suicide, her mother fell into drugs, and her sister went missing all within a crushingly short time. These tragedies were far too much for her friend's mind to handle... and yet, despite the seemingly random nature of these tragedies, none of them were without cause.

Each and every one was caused by the terrifying, monstrous power held within Hana's voice.

Even before this series of incidents had come to pass, Hana had always had the

vague feeling that something was wrong with her voice. However, no matter how often this feeling found her, she would always discard it, believing it to be nothing more than her imagination. A consistent series of coincidences. When she finally realized just how naïve she had truly been, as well as the sheer consequences her words had wrought, she sealed her mouth shut forever and immediately withdrew from all club activities. As a matter of course, this recession caused both classmate and friend alike to leave their newly mute friend behind. Hana silently accepted their choices to abandon her without protest; after all, she knew she could say nothing.

"What am I supposed to do now...?"

That was the last thing Hana had ever heard her friend say. Her face had had no visible expression, nor could any tears be seen... but those words had been more painful to Hana than any wails could have ever been. Hana was unable to say anything in return—but this was not because of her vow of silence. She wanted more than anything to apologize to her, or at the very least to provide her with some words of comfort, even if it meant breaking those very restrictions she had set for herself... and yet, despite her most desperate desire, her mouth refused to move. She could find neither words, nor the strength to speak them.

Hana could do nothing to help her friend.

"Kazuki?" Hatsuyama had stopped playing and was now peering at Hana's face.

In an attempt to stop her from assuming things, Hana went back to moving the mouse and quickly asked Hatsuyama a question instead. "What about you, Hatsuyama? What club were you in?"

"Oh, uh, I was in the Tennis Club. Still am, actually. Though it's pretty much dead now."

Huh. Didn't expect that, Hana thought to herself. She had assumed that Hatsuyama was more of an indoor person.

Perhaps because Hana's thoughts were written all over her face, Hatsuyama gave a pained smile. "Everyone's still technically in the club, but no one really does anything anymore—if they even show up. And I'm no better. The teachers like to say that exercise is now more important than ever after everything, but... we all know that it's not easy. Not anymore."

Hana nodded. These feelings of longing and dismay, often left unspoken, were ones that could be felt by all those who attended Hekiho Academy.

In what was likely a ploy to take her mind off of those feelings, Hana's hands sped across the desk as she slaughtered all the mobs on-screen with incredible finesse.

"We... We've all got a lot to deal with, huh..." Hatsuyama said.

Hana was not the only one who was in pain. Next to her sat someone who shared in her struggle—a person who, in the words of Hinae, was in the very same boat as her.

In the end, the two girls stayed in the manga café until 10 PM, which was the latest possible time students could stay until. Sensing that Hatsuyama didn't want to speak to the clerk at the front, Hana collected her share of the payment in advance, then proceeded to pay for both of their bills at the same time.

When the two parted, Hana suddenly found herself saying something to Hatsuyama. "Um... you don't have to call me by my last name, maybe... We're in the same grade, so I don't mind if you call me Hana," she said.

After a moment of stunned silence, Hatsuyama began to beam. "Okay! Then you can call me Mizuki."

"Huh...?"

"That's my first name. Mizuki."

Hana nodded. "I can do that."

And Hatsuyama's smile grew bigger than she had ever seen before.

On her way home, Hana had a sudden epiphany; she had not used the item that would have increased the drop rate of various rare items—the very perk the café's double pack advertised.

Oh well. It doesn't matter much, Hana thought to herself as she walked, her speed gleefully growing faster and faster with each step.

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A little over a week later, the Newspaper Club room was unusually quiet during lunchtime. Hana and Hinae had already picked up their lunches from the school store—lunches consisting of various pastries and rice balls—and Senri was eating her own meal that she had packed.

Ever since the school had reopened, the three would eat lunch together in the former clubroom. It was a very consistent routine for them; however, on this day, something was different. Hinae was acting strange: she was not talking at a million miles an hour like everyone was accustomed to her doing, and not once had she stolen one of Senri's side dishes for herself—all she'd done was give them a ravenous, longing side eye.

No matter how much time passed, Hinae said nothing. Eventually, Hana was unable to take it any longer and broke the silence. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Huh? Uh, nothing?" Hinae replied, shutting her down immediately. Silence overtook the room again.

Her answer was one Hana found skeptical, but Hinae, having just finished her lunch, paid her no mind; instead, she simply retrieved a book from her bag and flipped it open.

Senri smiled a mischievous smile. "I'm afraid someone's jealous, Hana," she said.

"A-Am not!" Hinae shot back, putting her book down. The speed at which she

had replied showed that she was clearly a bit flustered; to this, Senri's smile only deepened, her face emblematic of a scheming child with a penchant for teasing.

"Hana? Remember how you told us this morning about how you went over to Hatsuyama's house?" Senri asked.

Hana nodded.

"Well, I couldn't help but notice that, when you told us, Arimura was *unusually* quiet."

"Okay, fine! Maybe I am jealous! But can you blame me?!" Hinae shouted, nearly falling out of her chair as she did. Getting up, she ran over to Senri and clung to her shirt, her eyes full of tears. "It's only been, like, a week since Hana started talking to her! You wanna know how long it took Hana to come over to my house?! Literally forever! Why? Because it's *never happened*!"

"Didn't you say you don't want people coming over because you don't get along with your housemates?"

"I mean, we talk much more than before."

"Okay, then why not invite us over?"

"Yeah, not that much."

"You're giving some awfully mixed messages here..." Senri said exasperatedly. With one arm draped around Hinae's shoulders, she used the other one to stroke her hair as she spoke. She then looked over at Hana. "Don't mind her. It'll pass," she said.

"Don't worry. I won't," Hana replied.

"You *shouuuhuuuhuuld*!" Hinae cried out, hugging Senri even tighter as the crocodile tears fell from her eyes. Continuing to stroke her hair, Senri soothed her upset friend. Fortunately, the change in mood from before helped Hana to relax somewhat.

Ever since the two had first gone to the manga café together, Hana had been spending a lot of time together with Hatsuyama. As one would imagine with two high school students, they did not have the money to utilize the manga café very often, so they had only visited it once since their first time going. The other times they had met up, they would play portable video games together at an array of fast-food restaurants, or they would simply enjoy some tea together. It had only been yesterday that, at Hatsuyama's suggestion, Hana had come over to her house, and the two had talked and talked in her room until night fell.

Peeling her still-sobbing friend off of her, Senri turned to Hana. "So. I'm curious, Hana. What's this girl like?" As she spoke, she sat Hinae down in another chair, finally ungluing her from herself.

"Mmm... Someone I can't quite figure out, maybe..." Hana replied.

"What do you mean by that?" Senri raised an eyebrow, but Hana was unable to answer her—she was at a loss for words. She searched her thoughts.

When she had first gone to the manga café with Hatsuyama, Hana had thought of her as nothing more than a fellow gamer. But, after having played with her for the past week or so, Hana had developed a different impression.

In Hana's mind, a gamer wasn't just someone who enjoyed playing games in their spare time—they were someone who loved video games above all else. But, as she talked more and more with Hatsuyama, the girl told her about a wide array of other things she liked other than games. For example, before she had lost her motivation to participate in the Tennis Club, she would put a great deal of time and effort into the sport; she was also an avid reader.

But these were not the things that had caused Hana to feel strangely about her. No, it was that something about her felt... off.

There were several reasons for this. One reason was because, despite her being in the same grade as Hana, she had originally spoken fairly formally with her, only stopping when Hana suggested she do so and use her first name instead. And yet, despite this clear apprehension and sense of distance, she had somehow had the strength to invite someone she had never spoken to before to a manga café. Additionally, she'd used video games as her opener, even though she didn't seem to be terribly into them. She had also invited Hana over to her house after just one week of knowing her—but perhaps this was normal and Hana simply did not have enough experience to know that. Perhaps it was just a simple way for the two to grow closer fairly quickly; however, even then, she was sure that you would have to be fairly proactive in order to even make that suggestion. Lastly, Hana couldn't help but feel that Hatsuyama had had a far worse reaction to the prejudice Hekiho Academy students faced than most of the students did.

"It's complicated," Hana continued. "But even if I'm not sure about her yet, I still have fun when I'm with her."

Hana was telling the truth: she truly did enjoy her time with Hatsuyama. Perhaps this was in part due to it helping her feel as if she had been transported back to the past—back to when she had been able to have normal conversations with normal friends.

"She's... She's also never said anything bad about Takuru," Hana said.

"Really?" Senri replied, raising her eyebrows in surprise.

"Huh... That's pretty rare. Props to her," Halting her performative crying, Hinae, too, expressed her admiration, and Hana nodded.

Currently, among the student body of Hekiho Academy—or, more precisely, former Chaos Child Syndrome patients—the number of people who thought favorably of Takuru was next to none. Many, in fact, held nothing but feelings of intense contempt toward him. This was because of the widespread belief that he, a CCS patient himself, was behind the Return of the New Generation Madness, and that he had thus contributed to the prejudice against those with the syndrome as a result. Theories that those with the syndrome suffered from violent impulses were rampant, with many members of the public terrified of what might happen should another CCS patient "snap"; there was no definitive evidence to this effect,

and yet, despite this fact, it was still being constantly discussed all across the internet and in various weekly magazines, with all manner of influential commentators coming out from the woodwork to give their opinions. This fearmongering was often blamed on Takuru.

But, despite this widespread fear, Hana had never once heard Hatsuyama speak ill of Takuru—even though she was known to get very upset over the prejudice CCS patients faced.

Suddenly, the school bell rang, signaling to the three girls that lunchtime was over and that it was time to get to class. Clearing off the desks they were sitting at, they all stood up and got ready to leave.

"Ugh... Fiiiiine. As much as I hate to say this, you two make good friends," Hinae grumbled. "Man... I was *going* to take you window shopping this weekend, and then to this café I like... but fine. You can go hang out with your *real* best friend."

"I mean, I was already gonna go to the manga café today anyway," Hana replied.

"What. You *already made plans*?" Hinae's eyes widened in surprise. Then, she pursed her lips. "Typical... Using me for my body then throwing me away... just like everybody else..." With that, Hinae then left the room.

Feeling slightly uncomfortable, Hana looked to Senri for help; Senri, however, merely smiled a smile that said, *"She'll be fine."*

"Don't worry about her," she said aloud. "Right before the door closed, I saw her smile. Then again, I admit I can sympathize with her. It's a little sad to see you leaving the nest like this."

Just like how they ate lunch in the clubroom, the three girls would always meet in the same place after school just to talk—but over the past week or so, ever since Hana had started spending time with Hatsuyama, these meetings had greatly decreased in number.

"Sorry..." Hana said sheepishly.

"Don't be silly," Senri said, and her face suddenly turned serious. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Hana. You made a friend, and that is unquestionably a good thing. You should *treasure* this, not feel sorry for it. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yeah," Hana said with a nod, and Senri's smile came rushing back.

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I really do need to pick a club already... Hana thought to herself.

As she considered her options, Hatsuyama stepped back into the private room the two had rented at the manga café. The two girls had agreed that, after one more run of the dungeon they were playing through, they would head over to Hatsuyama's house. In the meantime, Hatsuyama had stepped out in order to get herself a drink from the soda fountain, returning shortly after. However, upon

returning, she looked strangely flustered.

Looking over at Hatsuyama, Hana realized that her friend not only seemed flustered, but she looked far worse than that—she looked as if she was about to break. She then noticed a small, orange-juice-colored stain on the sleeve of her light-pink blouse; she must have spilled some of her drink on it.

“Someone took a picture of me...” Hatsuyama muttered, shakily placing the juice she was holding on the desk. Moving to the far corner of the room, she pressed her back firmly against its soundproof walls, her gaze facing directly toward the door. She stared it down with everything she had, her eyes refusing to budge.

“Someone what?”

“Someone took a picture of me. With their phone. A girl...” Hatsuyama explained. Her voice was trembling. “She wouldn’t stop staring...”

Hana immediately got up from her chair and sped for the door, only for Hatsuyama’s hand to stop her. “Don’t,” she said. Hana tried to protest, but Hatsuyama pleaded with her. “Please. Just don’t.”

With a reluctant nod, Hana gave up on going outside and sat down right next to Hatsuyama. Perhaps unconsciously, it was as if she was trying to nestle up close to her in order to comfort her.

Due to the soundproofing, neither of them could hear any noise from outside; even so, the two remained completely still, straining their ears to hear even the faintest stray sound.

After a few moments passed, Hatsuyama apologized sadly to Hana. Hana, however, simply shook her head, telling her she had nothing to be sorry for.

Hatsuyama looked at Hana and smiled a pained smile; she wasn’t even attempting to hide the fact that she was trying to be strong. “How are you so good at dealing with it...?” she asked weakly.

“I’m not,” Hana answered. She didn’t have to explain her reasoning. All it was was that she was simply used to it.

Closing the distance between them, Hana leaned in so that her arm was touching her friend’s. With a smile, Hatsuyama leaned back against her.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, considering you were in Miyashiro’s club and all...” Hatsuyama said. Hana’s eyes widened, and she stared at Hatsuyama in shock. Hatsuyama gave a sheepish smile. “Truth is, I’m actually a pretty big fan of his. Like, how could you just... *do* something so crazy like that? It’s honestly incredible what he was able to accomplish.”

Hana was at a loss for words.

“We should probably get out of here... Besides, I have a lot of questions I really want to ask you,” Hatsuyama continued. Her tone was a cheerful one, but Hana did not reply verbally, nor did she even give her as much as a simple nod. But Hatsuyama seemed to take this lack of response as approval.

The two got up to leave. When it came time to pay the bill at the front, Hatsuyama hid behind Hana as she gave the clerk the money. After leaving the café, they began to walk toward the train station. Hatsuyama talked and talked the whole way there, but Hana did not say a word.

“Sorry to say, but before I found out I was sick, I’d never even heard of the Newspaper Club. After Miyashiro got caught though, everything went crazy, and I was taken straight to the hospital. That’s when I found out,” Hatsuyama said.

When the two reached the station platform, an announcement came over the loudspeaker. Trying her best to drown out Hatsuyama’s voice, Hana focused intently on it—but no matter how hard she tried to ignore the girl’s voice, it always seemed to find its way into her head. Even after the two boarded the train, Hatsuyama’s mouth refused to stop moving.

“When I saw my face, I was so shocked, I couldn’t even move. You know how in the movies people go, ‘I must be dreaming’? Well, I always used to think that was just some trope and that no one actually did that, but no—I *actually* thought that. It felt like the whole world was crashing down around me.”

Hatsuyama hesitated for a moment. “I still remember hoping that everyone else would just die. All those pretty nurses with gorgeous faces and perfect skin telling me, ‘Oh sweetie, you’ll be fine after some rehab’... I genuinely wanted them to die. Them, and all the people who threw us away like we were garbage... Who even cares if they die? They were just laughing at us behind our backs anyway—pretending to give a shit about us.”

Hatsuyama was growing more and more fervent. She was speaking faster than usual—she even seemed somewhat happy as she voiced how she had wished death on others.

“So yeah, I’ve done a whole lot of research on CCS—I wanted to know what caused it and all that. But, no matter where I looked, none of it made any sense. It was just a bunch of fake ass, garbage theories—it might as well’ve just been gossip. *But.* The Return of New Gen? That had a *ton* of people talking about it. I’m almost 99% sure that Miyashiro was the only one who knew the truth about CCS before everybody else did.”

The train arrived at Shibuya, and the two girls were pushed out of the station by the fast-moving sea of people. They were now situated in front of Shibuya Station, stopped in front of a traffic light at Scramble Crossing. People surrounded them on all sides.

Before this moment in time, Hatsuyama had never talked about anything related to her experience with Chaos Child Syndrome outside of school. But now, this could not be further from the truth.

“Everyone who got killed were people with CCS. And *man*, were they *killed*. It was totally brutal. I think it was supposed to be like him warning everyone—like, he was telling us to wake up. Why else would he have killed them in the most attention-grabby way possible? Maybe he thought that if the CCS patients were turned into corpses, other people with it would be able to see how they actually

looked." Hatsuyama then turned to Hana. "Hey Hana, did Miyashiro say anything to you before the pigs got him?"

The traffic signal changed color; but the very moment the flow of people began to move once again, Hana instantly spotted a familiar face.

It was Hinae. Or, more specifically, Hinae, Senri, Uki, and Yuto. The four of them were all happily chatting away with one another. Each and every one of them were smiling and laughing. If Hana broke into a sprint, she could've reached them in less than five seconds.

Hinae had said before that she had been planning on taking Hana window shopping, as well as to a café on that day. It seemed she had invited the members of Aoba Dormitory instead. The four were all looking at each other as they talked, and thus they had not noticed Hana.

"He even killed a girl who lived in the same orphanage-thing that he lived in. Isn't that wild?" Hatsuyama continued. "In the end though, he was apparently just the guy who started it. Itou's the one who came along and finished it. Oh, and speaking of Itou, I'm a big fan of his, too! Hey, do you think that he also realized what he actually looked like? Maybe he and Miyashiro were working together to wake everyone up!"

As the two entered the crosswalk, Hana interrupted her. "Sorry. I've gotta go." She had reached the limit of what she could take. "It's an emergency. I can't come over today anymore." Then, without waiting for a reply, Hana broke into a run. Hatsuyama tried to say something, but whatever it was, Hana let it bounce right off of her, and the girl's voice was lost in the sea of people.

Once she made it to the end of the crosswalk, Hana came to a sudden realization: her entire aim had been to reach Hinae and the others. She stopped dead in her tracks. No matter where she looked, her friends were nowhere to be seen. It had only been a few moments prior when they had all been talking happily with each other. These friends of hers were ones that she had endured terrible tragedy with—people whom she had shared everything with. Compared to them, was Hatsuyama truly a friend at all?

Guilt and anger pooled together inside her mind, growing more and more intense with every second they simmered. For some reason she couldn't understand, she wanted desperately to burst into tears. Unable to take it any longer, Hana broke into a sprint. She ran away from it all, running not toward Hinae and the others, nor toward Hatsuyama, but simply in the direction of people—all so she could lose herself in the crowd.

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After school one day, a knock sounded from the door to the clubroom Hana frequented.

A voice came seeping through the wood."Um, excuse me? Can I come in?"

Hana shot to her feet and immediately hid behind a bookshelf. Letting out a

sigh, Hinae got up from her seat and went to open the door. “Just a sec!” she shouted as she walked toward it.

Opening the door, Hinae stood face-to-face with Hatsuyama. When she saw who had answered the door, a look of puzzlement appeared on her face.

“U-Um, my name is Hatsuyama Mizuki. Is, uh... Is... Hana there?” she said, stammering.

“Oh, Hana? Pretty sure she already left. Sorry,” Hinae responded.

“Oh...” Hatsuyama said dejectedly. Silently thinking to herself for a moment, she then added, “Well, if you see her, could you tell her that I came by?”

With nothing left that she could do, Hatsuyama left the clubroom behind, letting the door close behind her.

After her footsteps disappeared, Hinae turned around and looked at Hana with a mildly exasperated expression on her face. “Coast’s clear.”

Hana trudged out from behind the bookshelf, plopped herself down in a chair, and let her arms and head fall onto the accompanying desk with a solid *thud*.

“Kazuki, you can’t keep doing this forever. You know that, right?” Senri, who was currently working through a pile of student-council-related paperwork, was the next to speak up; her voice was also one of exasperation.

“I know... Sorry...” Hana moaned. She never would have thought that Hatsuyama would go as far as to visit the Newspaper Club room.

Across the several days that had passed since Hana had decided to silently cut ties with Hatsuyama, she had done everything in her power to avoid her. She hadn’t responded to her text or RINE messages, she’d ignored her calls, and she’d most definitely avoided seeing her in person. During lunch or other break periods, she would hide in the bathroom or the Newspaper Club room, and, since she knew Hatsuyama would wait for her at the front gate, she deliberately chose to take the back gate or to come back far later than usual.

“Okay, you know what? I’m done with this—I feel like I’m losing my mind,” Hinae said, fed up. “Why are you even avoiding her anyway?”

Without looking up from her desk, Hana simply shook her head.

“What, did she *steal some of your lunch* or something? Or worse—*some dessert* you were *saving for later*?”

“Can you take me seriously, please?” Hana grumbled.

“Yeah, I *could*, but how am I supposed to when you’re telling me literally nothing? Talk to me, girl!”

I... I just can’t... Hana thought to herself.

Every memory she had shared with Hatsuyama was now colored with shame. She hated herself for having enjoyed even a single second with her—but, even then, there was still something else that took precedence: she did not want Hinae

or Senri to get hurt. And she knew very well that, if she were to tell them exactly the reason why Hatsuyama had never spoken badly of Takuru, that was exactly what would happen.

"Like, how could you just... do *something so crazy like that? It's honestly incredible what he was able to accomplish."*

Her words rattled around inside her skull; Hatsuyama's voice refused to leave her for even a second.

Simply due to how the "facts" of the case had spread across the world, Hana and her friends had long since grown used to the public's response being one of condemnation and hatred—used to living in a world that declared their beloved friend, or even sibling, to be a cold-blooded killer. On the other side of the coin, however, there were those out there who believed that Takuru was of a certain breed of serial killers that served a noble goal—that he was a god living among mortal men. Neither of these types of people bothered Hana and her friends, however; and, by that point in time, they had long since stopped giving said types any of their attention. After all, they were the ones who knew the real truth about the case—all those who did not were nothing more than a misguided group of fools with nothing better to do with their lives.

Yet, despite this general apathy, those words had come from someone who knew the pain of CCS just as well as Hana did—for this reason, they had managed to sneak past her walls and weave their way into her mind. To make matters worse, their presence was made all the more prevalent due to how distorted of a view it truly was.

To Hana, it would have been easier if Hatsuyama had said the same things that internet trolls did when they sardonically pretended as if Takuru was some sort of mythical hero. Acting as if their feelings were the only ones that mattered, they would spew out their anonymous commentary from behind their computer screens, never knowing, nor caring to know, the real harm they were causing. And yet, even so, Hana longed for her friend to be like that instead—if she was, Hana could have simply placed her in the same box as those awful people and thrown her to the wayside where she could be easily ignored.

But she wasn't.

"I think it was supposed to be like him warning everyone—like, he was telling us to wake up."

When Hatsuyama had said that, Hana wanted to scream at her. She wanted to drill it into her how wrong she was, but she knew she couldn't. She couldn't tell her the truth. Not under any circumstances.

Thinking about how excited Hatsuyama had been back then, Hana came to a realization. Perhaps the only reason why Hatsuyama had approached her in the first place was because she had wanted to ask about Takuru. Perhaps that was why she had started playing ESO2 as well. Ever since they had first started playing, Hana had gotten the distinct impression that the girl was not all that interested in video games—and if Takuru had always been her goal, that abstract

feeling made sense.

“Kazuki. Do you remember what I said the other day?”

The sound of Senri’s voice made Hana look up from her desk. She did not know what Senri was referring to, which showed through in the frown that formed on her face.

“I said that friends are something you should treasure. Though I’m well aware I can’t force you to listen to me.”

“Oh, that... I uh, that’s not... It doesn’t have anything to do with that, it’s just...” Hana shook her head frantically as she tried to explain herself, but no matter what she tried, the words just wouldn’t come to her.

“It’s just what?” Senri said, trying to help her along.

Hana looked at her friend as she tried to sort out what exactly she was truly feeling. What she should do.

Senri was indeed right—this couldn’t go on forever. In all likelihood, Hatsuyama wanted to ask her about what had happened the other day—but the whole truth was something Hana could never tell her. She could lie to her in order to placate her, but she was at a loss of what she would do after that point. If she simply went along with it, Hatsuyama would continue with her misguided rants—something Hana absolutely could not continue to sit there and take in silence. It wasn’t something that would go away given enough time. She had to address it.

“Um... Hey, guys? If someone, um... If you had to compromise with someone on something, how would you do it? As in... with friends from school?” Hana asked, having finally found some semblance of words.

Ever since the school had reopened, Hana had seen her friends getting along with many people, almost as if nothing had changed. Considering who Hinae was, this had not been a surprise with her—the real surprise was how Senri, too, continued to speak with many other students while serving her position as student council president.

“I think we’re gonna need a bit more info than that,” Hinae said. “Compromise about what?”

“Like... about the case. And... about Takuru. Stuff like that.”

Hinae and Senri looked at each other for a moment, then turned their attention back to Hana. “Well, for starters, I don’t *do* compromise when it comes to that. I know the truth, and everyone who doesn’t pisses me off and can therefore bite me,” Hinae said.

“That might be going a bit too far...” Senri replied, laughing sheepishly. “But the truth of the matter is, as long as we can’t tell anyone the truth behind what happened, there’s no real sense in coming to a compromise.”

“Huh. That’s not what I thought you’d say,” Hana said. Before, she had been absolutely certain that her two friends were forced to simply repress their true

feelings in order to continue associating with anyone.

“I knew it. She said something about Miyashiro, didn’t she? Is *that* why all this is happening? Why you’re all pissed?” Hinae demanded.

After letting Hinae’s words swim around in her head for a moment, Hana nodded; she had not expected her harsh words to have hit the mark so well. “Yeah... It is... maybe...”

Perhaps she was right. Perhaps Hana *was* incredibly angry. Of course, she was furious with Hatsuyama for saying such things about Takuru, but that wasn’t where it ended. No, she was also furious about the horrible situation she was in—a situation in which she could never say the real truth she so desperately wanted to say—and she was furious with herself for simply acting exactly as she had been told to act.

I hate this... Hana thought to herself.

After that day, Hana started spending time with Hinae and Senri once again. After school, she would go to their usual meet-up spot in the clubroom; once she arrived, she would spend time there until Senri came back from her student council duties, then they would all walk home together. On the weekend, they went to the clothing store and café that Hinae had mentioned a few days prior, and, on the way back, they stopped by Aoba Dormitory and had dinner together.

During that entire length of time, neither Hinae nor Senri once asked about Hatsuyama. The feeling that they were both waiting for Hana to initiate the conversation hung heavy in the air, but, no matter how much time passed, she stayed completely silent. Once they realized that, they simply accepted that things had gone back to how they had been before.

Hatsuyama had stopped trying to make contact with Hana at all. To confirm this, after a few days passed of her no longer waiting for Hana at the school gate anymore, Hana stayed in Hatsuyama’s classroom during break time, and she never came. Although perhaps it was because they had simply grown accustomed to not looking for each other anymore, the two didn’t even seem to come across each other in the hallways.

It was selfish to have distanced herself from Hatsuyama in this way. Hana knew this, and as such, she was hit with an array of mixed emotions: first and foremost, she felt relieved, but at the same time, she felt something she couldn’t quite discern. It wasn’t regret, per se, but some part of her felt some form of disappointment—an emotion that left her feeling somewhat vexed.

In accordance with her old routine, Hana had also started to play video games again on her handheld console during recess. No one ever approached her—her classmates didn’t even seem to have noticed that she had been gone so often previously. Her old routine had resumed in full, and this was something Hana had no strong feelings about one way or the other.

One day, after school, Hana was in the clubroom with Hinae and Senri discussing what movie they wanted to watch tomorrow, as they didn't have school that day. Hana wanted to see an action movie; Hinae, however, had always been partial to more grounded films, and as such, she suggested seeing a much deeper, socially conscious German film that dealt with far more nuanced concepts —ones that were difficult to fully grasp. When asked to pick between the two, Senri initially defaulted to the Hollywood blockbuster that Hana had suggested due to its easier-to-understand nature, but she ultimately suggested that they see whatever movie was shown first the next morning; this was because the movie theater they all frequented was less expensive during early hours.

Upon examination, they saw that the first film on the schedule was an animated children's movie. The discussion then became particularly spirited, with Hinae shouting, "You guys have no taste at all! It's like you don't even *get* movies!"

Clearly taking some offense to this, Senri responded in a desperate attempt to solve the dispute by explaining how the animated movie that would be showing in the morning would contain both the action Hana wanted to see, as well as a script dense enough that Hinae would also enjoy it, only for her to suddenly be interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Um, excuse me?"

Hana jolted upward, only to quickly realize that the voice did not belong to Hatsuyama. She looked at Hinae and Hana, but neither of them seemed to have any idea who was behind the door.

Standing up, Hana made her way over to the door and opened it.

"Oh, hi. You're Kazuki, right?" the person on the other side said. It was a female student; she had a healthy tan, and she was wearing a Hekiho jersey.

"Yeah, that's me. What is it?" Hana replied.

The female student then looked into the room and saw the other two girls, which immediately changed her course of action. "Sorry, but I need to talk to her in private real quick." Grabbing Hana's hand, she pulled her out of the room and into the hallway.

"U-Uh...?"

"Sorry, I know this is kind of out of nowhere. I'm one of Mizu's friends from the Tennis Club... Er, sorry, I mean Mizuki. You're a friend of hers, right?"

A shudder ran through Hana. After a moment, though, she nodded.

"Thought so. Anyway, the reason I'm here is because I need to ask: Have you heard from her at all recently? Any calls? Texts?"

Hana had used to receive calls and texts from Hatsuyama every day, but now, she hadn't seen one for days and days. "No, I haven't."

"Shoot... Well, I didn't think you would, but I still figured I'd ask," the student paused. "Say, you've been hanging around with her a lot lately, haven't you?"

“Mm... kind of...” Hana replied.

“Well, when you were, did you notice anything... off about her?”

After pondering this for a moment, Hana replied. “I don’t think so...” She had not known her for long enough in order to make a definitive statement on how she would normally act; still, there hadn’t seemed to have been anything wrong with her physically, at least. “Did something happen?”

“She... She hasn’t been coming to school recently. And I can’t get ahold of her,” the girl responded, her face falling.

“Oh no... When was the last time you saw her?”

“About a week ago.”

That was exactly when Hana had stopped seeing her around school. Hana was dumbfounded.

“Do you have any idea where she is?” The girl asked, her voice full of hope. Unfortunately for her, Hana doubted she would’ve been able to properly explain the situation to her. Even if she could have, she wasn’t certain that it had anything to do with her distancing herself in the first place.

“No... I’m... just as surprised as you are...”

Despite her saying this, Hana was still unsure. Taking a breath to try and reduce the tension in her mind, she attempted to sort out her thoughts.

If Hatsuyama’s disappearance was because of her, then she should have stopped coming immediately after the incident at the manga café—not just a week ago. And not only had she not stopped coming to school before that, but she had waited by the school gate and had come directly to the clubroom. So while yes, Hana had been avoiding her, she did not think she was the reason Hatsuyama had decided to stop attending.

The girl waited for Hana to say anything else, but upon realizing she was opting to stay silent, she took out her phone. “Um, sorry to ask you this, but can you give me your number? Just in case Mizu calls or texts you or something?”

With a nod, Hana input her phone number into the girl’s cell phone. She mentioned that both she and Hatsuyama were first-years, and while she wasn’t in any classes with her, they did share a club together.

“It’s not like I’m gonna see her at club, after all—she hasn’t come pretty much at all since school started back up,” the girl said with a sad, defeated smile. She then turned to leave, but before she did, she turned back to Hana and said, “Well, if I hear from her, I’ll be sure to let you know.” Hana was taken aback by her words, which made the girl tilt her head. “I mean, the two of you are friends, right?”

Hana was at a loss for words; unable to determine her own feelings, she could only manage a simple “Mmm...”

A sound that neither affirmed nor denied their friendship.

Upon returning to the clubroom, Hinae and Senri looked at Hana with concern. However, when she tried to wave it off with a simple, “It was nothing,” Senri quickly combated with a, “It certainly doesn’t look like nothing.”

Senri’s expression was stern and serious, but regardless, Hana responded, “Really, it’s nothing.” She didn’t want them to worry. And yet, despite her best efforts, her two friends stared at her for a long time. She didn’t make eye contact with them.

Eventually, Hinae broke the silence with a sudden clap of her hands. “Okay, Hana,” she said. “I know how you feel. You don’t have to say anything. *But.* If you ever feel like telling us, please do it. I promise we’ll listen.”

Hana nodded apologetically. Senri seemed unsatisfied with this outcome, but, after a moment, she gave a sigh of resignation, and the tension was dispelled.

“Now that we’ve got that taken care of, here’s the plan for tomorrow: For starters, we all agreed we’re gonna go see that German movie,” Hinae said.

“Excuse me? I’m afraid you’re jumping the gun a little here—we haven’t agreed on anything.” Senri protested.

“Yeah, well, you’ve all forced me to break out my ultimate move. I was *gonna* save this for one of those crazy expensive 3D movies, but if we use this coupon I’ve got, we can see the movie I wanna see for the same price as if we went in the morning.”

“Oh, all right... In that case, I’m fine with the foreign film. I suppose it wouldn’t be the best look for three high schoolers to go and see a kids movie anyway.”

“Okay, Senri? I get that you’re, like, the one who brings home the bacon and whatnot since you’re the one with a job or whatever, but couldn’t you make it a *little* less obvious that’s the only thing you care about? Like, you waffle a *lot*.”

Sitting in between them as they argued, to Hana, it was as if two girls’ voices were coming from somewhere far, far away.

She could not stop thinking about the words that girl had said to her in the hallway.

“I mean, the two of you are friends, right?”

No matter what she did, those words refused to leave her mind.

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Upon arriving home later that day, Hana retrieved Hatsuyama’s contact card on her phone. Her number displayed prominently on the center of the screen, and Hana stared and stared at it as the minutes trickled by. But no matter how long her gaze bore into it, the screen refused to change—and in the end, Hana did not call her.

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The following day, it was late in the afternoon when the three girls finally found themselves in the lobby of a very crowded movie theater.

The theater was located near the love hotel district of Dogenzaka. It was a far smaller theater than normal and tended to dabble purely in independent films.

Hana, Senri, and Hinae arrived at the theater thirty minutes before the movie began; this was because smaller-scale theaters often provided pamphlets detailing various aspects of the movie, and Hinae was the type who always liked to read those very carefully before the movie started. Of course, this meant that Hinae was currently leaning against the wall, her eyes racing across the paper. Standing next to her was Hana, absentmindedly staring into space as the many other moviegoers passed them by.

“Are you all right, Hana?” Senri asked her.

Hana nodded; she knew that Senri was worried about her, but she knew just as well that there was nothing she could do to help ease her own mind—so there was no point in saying anything. After all, not even Hana knew what was bothering her, let alone what to do about it.

Ten minutes before the movie began, Hana was just about to open the door to the auditorium when her phone rang. Taking a look at her screen, she saw that the name displayed was the same as the female student she had exchanged phone numbers with the day before.

“Hello? Hi, Kazuki, I just have a quick question,” the girl said over the phone.

“Oh, uh... now’s not really the best time...” Hana tried to protest, but the girl continued regardless.

“Did you and Mizu ever go to a manga café together?”

Upon realizing how flustered the girl sounded, Hana decided to answer honestly. “We did.”

“Okay. I wasn’t sure, but... the reason I ask is because... there’s this picture going around on Twipo.”

“Huh...?”

“I don’t really know who took it or why, but it’s spreading. Fast..”

“I don’t understand.”

“Join the freakin’ club!” As the girl spoke, her voice would become distant for a few seconds, before returning to a normal volume. She must have been using her phone as she talked. “It gets worse, though. It’s not just her—you’re in the photo too, I think. Here, I just sent it to you. That’s your student ID, isn’t it?”

Hana gulped. Hinae and Senri looked at her with concern; they had likely sensed that something was wrong.

A picture of her and Hatsuyama had been posted online. When she realized that, Hana thought back to that one time at the manga café—when Hatsuyama

had turned to her and said with a frightened look on her face, *“Someone took a picture of me.”*

“This has to be it. This has to be why Mizu hasn’t been at school,” the girl said. “Kazuki, did she ever tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“This... isn’t the first time this has happened to her. Someone took a picture of her during rehab once... Oh god, what do we do...?”

Hana was stunned. She had no idea what to say or do—even if she did, the words refused to come.

“She’s not answering her phone... I’ll try calling her again. If she doesn’t pick up, you try after me,” the girl said. Then, without waiting for an answer, she immediately hung up.

With no audio left coming from the phone, Hana’s ears were overrun with the sounds of the bustling crowd of people entering the theater.

“What’s wrong, Kazuki?” Senri asked, leaning her head in close. Without answering her, Hana launched Twipo on her phone and searched in the Discover tab for “Chaos Child Syndrome.” When the results populated, her eyes landed upon a certain picture.

A picture with Hatsuyama’s face.

“Oh god... That’s bad...” Hinae murmured.

The specific picture was a collage of four different photos arranged in a comic-esque fashion. The very first frame was a picture of Hatsuyama’s face, likely from elementary school. She had a bright, toothy grin on her face—one befitting of her age.

The second frame was Hatsuyama in a hospital gown; it was a picture of her during rehab, with the exertion it had taken to get through being clear to see. Her hair was short, and she was not wearing glasses, leading Hana to not recognize her at first. It must have been very early on in rehab; the aging effects of the syndrome were very evident on her face, as well as the arm holding the cane she was placing all of her weight on.

The third frame was a photo of her student ID. She had received it back when Hekiho Academy had reopened around three months ago; all the students had had their pictures taken once again during this time, and their student IDs had thus been updated. The passage of time was obvious, as Hatsuyama looked far more gaunt in the picture than she did now. And, to make matters much, much worse, slightly to the right of her ID was what appeared to be a partial capturing of Hana’s student ID.

The very last frame was a picture of Hatsuyama holding a cup.

A photo of her in the manga café.

A photo of her holding a glass of orange juice.

Hana remembered the sleeves of her light-pink blouse being stained orange with the juice.

Above the collage, there was a single line of text titling the image, “CCS’s Progression In the Wild,” and the impressions showed that the picture had spread to a fairly substantial degree. Surrounding the image were horrific, abusive comments—comments that she herself had long since grown tired of seeing in her day-to-day life.

“Fucking yuck.”

“Behold: the miracle of metamorphosis.”

“Subhuman freaks.”

“Mizuki... Mizuki hasn’t been coming to school recently,” Hana said to Senri. “Maybe this is why.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Senri said, her tone somewhat accusatory. When Hana looked at her, she saw that Senri was staring at the phone with an unquestionably angry look in her eyes. But Hana could not answer her—all she could do was put the phone back in her pocket, her hands refusing to stop trembling.

“What are you going to do?” Senri asked. But Hana simply hung her head. She had no idea.

Silence hung over the room for several moments, when suddenly, Senri’s hands found their way onto Hana’s face.

“Kazuki. Look at me,” she said. With one hand on each cheek, she lifted Hana’s head up to face her and looked directly into her eyes. “This is your friend, and therefore your problem to solve. So I am giving you a choice. You can either stay here to watch the movie with us... or, if you’re feeling as if you’d rather do something else, you can leave. You can choose to tell us what’s going on before you go, or you can choose not to. I am perfectly fine with either. However, even if you don’t tell us the reason for you leaving, I need you to tell us *exactly* what you’re going to do. I will not be able to sit still otherwise.”

Senri had a big smile stretching across her entire face, but the vice grip with which she was grasping Hana’s face conveyed a much different emotion.

Frightened, Hinae took a step back. “Oh god... it’s the Empress...”

If Hana could have, she would have taken a step back too, but she couldn’t—two hands were digging into her cheeks, after all.

Hana knew very well what the expression on Senri’s face meant; whenever she wore it, she was at her most fearsome, and most terrifyingly short-tempered—so much so that she didn’t even seem like the same person.

When Hana at last somehow managed to nod, Senri removed her hands from her face.

“Hey, Senri...? When Ms. Komori came along as your new caregiver... why did you accept her?” Hana asked.

Senri’s expression changed; she raised her eyebrows, as if she didn’t understand what exactly was being asked.

“And it wasn’t just you—Uki and Yuto also accepted her. Why?” Hana elaborated.

At this point in time, Hana had already come across Ms. Komori, the newest member of Aoba Dormitory, many times. She, along with Hinae, had also heard from Senri that she was a member of the police, and that they had all evaluated her and believed she was a good person. She also knew that, by law, Aoba Dorm was required to have some form of caregiver, and that Ms. Komori had the certifications that allowed her to serve that role.

And yet, despite all those things, Hana had still been surprised to learn that, despite how much Senri deeply valued the idea of family, she had allowed that woman into it. But Hana knew that, in spite of her reluctance, this was something she would just have to accept. Yet, even though she knew that, somewhere in her mind, she had been holding on to a specific sentiment—one in which she believed that those who knew the truth of the case, and *only* those who knew would spend their lives together in that dormitory until they all grew old together.

“Do you think Takuru would be okay with it?” Hana asked.

Ever since they had returned from the hospital, there had been a place around the table that Hana, Hinae, and all three members of Aoba Dormitory couldn’t bring themselves to sit in—a place that was now occupied by Ms. Komori. When Hana had initially asked about this decision, Senri had replied that it had been Uki’s idea to give it to her—that it was something that had to be done. Hana understood the *logic* behind the choice—she even understood the emotional side to it—but, even so...

“I...” A small, hesitant murmur came from Senri’s lips—one that was clearly audible, yet quiet as could be. As she waited for her to find her words, Hana averted her eyes.

“Are you kidding me? Of course he’d be okay with it,” Hinae said in her typical carefree tone. “Besides, a wise woman once said, ‘The more you treasure something, the more willing you must be to part with it—lest your imparted value

begin to damage the very treasure you hold so dear.' So c'mon, who the heck do you think we are, Hana? We're not kids anymore. Yes, we care about him a lot, but we've gotta move on at some point. We've gone through a lot together, and that made us so much stronger. Did you forget all that?"

Hana was taken aback by her words; Senri, meanwhile, gave a weak smile. "You know, it was actually Uki. She's the reason we are where we are today," she said. "When I was struggling to find how to respond to Ms. Komori, Uki stepped in and helped me. But she wasn't the only one—Ms. Komori helped me, too. They helped tear down the walls I had built up because of that awful man... I wasn't strong enough to do it on my own. I would never have been strong enough."

"Pfft. Must've been made out of freaking steel if you, of all people, weren't strong enough..." Hinae spat out. In response, Senri gave her the same big smile she had displayed before with Hana, to which Hinae's face immediately stiffened up and she quickly shrunk back.

"You're strong, Kazuki. You know you are. So while I may not know much about Hatsuyama, nor the current situation between you two... what I do know is this: when it comes to CCS, you are stronger than she is. So while it may not be my place to say this—whatever is causing this grief you two are experiencing... you need to..." Senri's words hopelessly trailed off.

But Hana still knew exactly what to do—and she didn't need anyone else to tell her to do it. Retrieving her phone from her pocket, she looked at the image she had seen only moments ago.

This is stupid...

That was all that came to mind. It was a really, really stupid picture. It meant absolutely nothing.

"Hina?" Hana said.

"Yeah?"

"Who were you quoting a second ago? It was nice."

Hinae puffed out her chest in a pompous manner. "Why, the greatest philosopher of all time, Arimura Hinae, of course!"

"Oh... Wow..." The expressions of awe came to her naturally. *Huh... Guess the Literature Club actually is worth something after all...* Hana thought to herself.

"Sorry, but I've got something I need to go do. I'll see you guys later," Hana said.

"What? *Now?*" Hinae replied in surprise. She pointed toward the auditorium—the movie was just about to start. The three girls were the only ones left in the lobby.

"If you had something really important you had to do, you'd leave too."

Hinae started to wave the pamphlet back and forth in her fluster. "O-Okay, sure, but like, that doesn't really apply here! I paid for your ticket! And besides,

even if I didn't, I've been looking forward to this like crazy since we finally picked the stupid movie! It's been forever since we saw one together! And we had the rest of the day planned out too!"

"I don't see how that makes a difference. It's an emergency," Senri said, rebuking Hinae. "Be safe, Kazuki."

"I will."

The moment the noise signaling the start of the movie sounded throughout the lobby, Hana took off running. The word *"Traitor!"* followed her out the door, only for it to be quickly muffled when Senri slapped her hand over Hinae's mouth.

Scrolling through the images on her phone, she wondered what exactly her first move should be, all while a look of excitement spread across her face.

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It was around 8:30 in the evening when Hana arrived at Hatsuyama's house. She had not answered the phone when Hana had attempted to call, so while Hana did not have permission to come over, she had done so all the same.

Hatsuyama's mother answered the door, and she was more than willing to let Hana in despite the late hour; she remembered Hana's face from the last time she had come to visit her daughter.

Upon asking Mrs. Hatsuyama what was going on, Hana learned that Hatsuyama had locked herself in her room. Her mother also confirmed that she had done so because of the images being spread around on the internet.

As Hatuyama's mother told this all to Hana, a clear sense of exhaustion and sadness could be felt coming from her. "When I think about how she must be feeling, I just can't bring myself to force her to come out..." she said.

As Mrs. Hatsuyama led Hana to her daughter's room, she explained to her that Hatsuyama was allowed to stay home from school under one condition: she had to leave her door unlocked. As long as she did so, she didn't even have to leave her room.

Upon arriving in front of Hatsuyama's room, Hana told Mrs. Hatsuyama that she would take it from there, and Mrs. Hatsuyama bowed deeply in gratitude.

"Mizuki. I'm coming in," Hana said, and without waiting for a reply, she opened the door.

"What are you doing here?" Hatsuyama asked, stunned.

Hatsuyama was sitting on the bed, and the moment Hana laid eyes on her, she was taken aback. Hatsuyama's hair, which had originally stretched down to her chest, was now cut so short, it did not even reach her shoulders. She was not wearing her glasses, either.

And yet, despite this vastly different look, Hana felt that she recognized her from somewhere. But that feeling did not sit unanswered for long, for Hana

quickly realized where she had seen it before. It was from one of the pictures in that collage that had been posted online—specifically, it was from the picture of Hatsuyama in the midst of rehab. In it, she looked exactly like she looked now—all that was missing was the signs of rapid aging.

"I said. What. Are you doing here?" Hatsuyama said, enunciating her words in a manner much clearer than before.

"I saw the pictures," Hana responded. She then went on to explain that she had heard about them being posted from a friend of Hatsuyama's from the Tennis Club.

"Oh..." Hatsuyama said. Cradling her knees to her chest, she let her head fall even lower, burying it in them. "Sorry I didn't answer the phone..."

"Mm. I'm sorry, too—for avoiding you for all this time," Hana said.

"So I was right. You *were* avoiding me." Despite her words, Hatsuyama did not sound surprised at all.

"So you were wearing a wig the whole time, huh? And the glasses were just for show, too?"

Without lifting her face free from her knees, Hatsuyama moved her head just enough to signal a light nod.

"You were wearing them because of that photo, weren't you? The one from back when you were in rehab?" Hana said.

"How do you know that?" Hatsuyama looked up from her knees in surprise.

"Your friend told me. She told me that how you look at school isn't what you really look like."

"I just... I do it because... I hate how I look."

"Is that why you stopped showing up at the Tennis Club? I thought that maybe it was for the same reason everybody else doesn't show up anymore—because your body just doesn't work like it used to... but that's not true, is it? No, you stopped showing up because you didn't want anyone to take any pictures of you. The tennis courts are outside, after all."

Hatsuyama gave a weak smile; Hana could see right through her. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Miyashiro *was* your club president, I guess—"

"Okay, stop right there," Hana said abruptly, cutting her off. Approaching Hatsuyama on the bed, in a single, swift motion, she moved in very close to her face—to the point where they were almost touching.

"Takuru isn't the kind of person you think he is. Those murders weren't some warning he was sending to people with CCS—he didn't even realize what *he* looked like."

Hatsuyama was stunned; perhaps intimidated by the sudden pressure being laid on her by Hana, she leaned farther backward. Hana, however, leaned even farther

forward to match her.

“I don’t know what exactly he was thinking when he did all these things, and I don’t know what his plan was supposed to be in doing them. Nobody does.”

When this lie left her mouth, she felt an immediate pang in her chest; to endure it, Hana bit her lip hard and dug her nails into her palm.

“Yui... Yui was his younger sister. He never wished for what happened to her. And Itou didn’t either. They aren’t like that.”

“You’re wrong... They had to have done it for a reason. I mean, what happened... all of Japan went crazy over it!” Hatsuyama argued. “Actually, no, not just Japan—it’s been on the news all over the world. Did you not know that?”

Bang!

The sound of Hana’s fist hitting the wall beside the bed boomed throughout the room, silencing Hatsuyama before she could say another word.

“What are you trying to accomplish here, Mizuki?” Hana demanded.

“Huh...?”

“What do you get out of acting like Takuru and Itou or *whoever else* you want to deify are misunderstood heroes or something? Because it’s an easy solution? Because you want to believe that maybe, just maybe, some people who had CCS were actually sane? Or are you trying to convince yourself that you’ve figured out the *real* truth before anyone else did? That you’re *different* from everyone else who suffered?”

As she spoke, Hana was reminded of back when she had still been chasing the case as a member of the Newspaper Club; both back then and right now, the exact opposite emotion to comfort filled her heart, causing it to pound like a violent thunderstorm. Nevertheless, Hana endured this feeling as best she could as she continued to speak.

“Even if that was true—even if all of this lined up perfectly and came together in an awesome little conspiracy—it won’t change the fact that you had and *always will* have had CCS. That you’re a victim. It won’t take down those pictures from the internet, and it won’t stop people from posting them.”

“That’s not... That’s not why I...” Hatsuyama murmured; she tried her hardest to reject Hana’s words, but her voice had no power behind it. All she could do was look away, retreat back into her knees, and tremble as if the chill of winter had roosted inside her very soul. “I-I mean, think about it! Miyashiro, he... he was the first person to recover from CCS! Come on, you’d have to be insane to think that’s just a coincidence! There’s no way he didn’t already know what he actually looked like!”

A loud thud rang out as Hana struck the wall once again, and Hatsuyama cowered in fear. The wallpaper had cracked under her fist, and the wall beneath it had been ever so slightly dented.

“Takuru is not your escape,” Hana said.

Hatsuyama was scared of her now. But Hana did not care. Taking out her phone, she checked the time; it was just before 9 PM. Grabbing Hatsuyama by the hand, she dragged her off the bed and over to the computer on the other side of the room.

“H-Hey! Ow!” Hatsuyama yelped.

“Just look. It’s almost time.”

Taking control of the computer—which Hatsuyama had left open—Hana searched for Twipo, then navigated to the account that had been spreading the images.

“No! Let me go!” Hatsuyama shouted, refusing to look at the computer screen. Displayed on it was the comic-style collage; the figures indicating how many times it had been shared had increased since the time Hana had seen it at the movie theater earlier that day.

Once the clock struck 9:00, Hana clicked the refresh button. The page loaded once more, but the elements on the screen remained unchanged—save for a minor increase in the number of impressions. Hatsuyama tried once more to retreat back to her bed, but Hana grabbed her once more, holding her in place.

“I’m serious, Hana, let me go!” Hatsuyama tried to protest. But Hana did not listen, instead continuing to refresh the screen every thirty seconds or so.

After about five minutes of this had passed, the screen finally changed to something different. In the place of the image was a single message: “This Tweep is from an account that no longer exists..”

“Huh...?”

Paying no mind to Hatsuyama’s confusion, Hana refreshed the page again, then again just to be sure. But, despite those refreshes, the same message was still displayed. Then, with a resounding “Mmm,” Hana nodded. “The OP deleted his account. He ran away with his tail between his legs,” she said. “But he won’t get off that easy.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Do you remember the photo of your student ID that was in the post? That was from when we got it scanned over at the manga café.”

At manga cafés, due to the high volume of customers using the computers, the majority of establishments made copies of their customers’ IDs for the sake of verifying their identities. That way, they could cut down on identity theft or other similar harmful crimes. The manga café Hana and Hatsuyama had used was no exception. It seemed Hatsuyama had already been aware of this, as she murmured, “That’s... I was thinking about that...”

“It’s against the law to leak someone’s personal information without their permission. Knowing that, I got a hold of that one CCS patient advocacy group, and they immediately shot the café a formal complaint. We have rights.”

The group had responded with great enthusiasm to Hana’s call. She had

apologized profusely over the phone for calling over the weekend, only to be told that organizations such as theirs—ones that often acted as nonprofit entities—were actually *more* likely to be active on the weekends rather than less. They then said that, at around 9 PM, they would be able to contact the café that Hana knew had been the source of the leaked image; after all, the only way for the leak to have happened was if one of the employees had done so. The organization predicted that, once the employee received the call, they would panic and delete the image, and this prediction had now been shown to be correct.

"You said that a girl took a picture of you at the manga café. Well, turns out they were a friend of the employee that leaked your ID," Hana explained.

Hatsuyama stared at the monitor in disbelief. She took the mouse and refreshed it for herself several times, but no matter how many times she did so, the message remained present.

"There's no way..."

As her hands continued to move about the keyboard and mouse, Hatsuyama's face looked as if she was watching a miracle being made real—one she was desperately hoping *was* real. And yet, when she decided not to refresh the page again, but to use Twipo's search function, her face fell; on another page, she had found the same collage of her face.

"I knew it..." Hatsuyama whispered sadly. Just because the original source of the image had disappeared did not mean that the image itself had—the data had already spread. Countless users had saved it while it had still been up, and now, the picture was being reposted again and again; it was like an infestation.

"Mm. I thought this would happen. But remember, I said he wasn't gonna get away with it. And I meant it." As Hana said this, she typed in a series of words with impressive speed and accuracy, and the page on Twipo changed.

"What the...?"

Displayed on the screen now was yet another collage. However, in this one, it was not Hatsuyama who was featured—it was Hana. The composition was the exact same, with one picture showing Hana prior to CCS, one of her during rehab, one of her student ID, then a current photo.

"I made this earlier today. I sent it to the email of the guy who spread that first post, and, just like that, the next time I looked at Twipo, it went viral. I also had the CCS patient advocacy group go off on him about that, and in the process, his Facemook, as well as all his other social media accounts disappeared. *Everything* on him leaked—his real name, what school he went to... They even found the girl who took your photo. Turns out they were dating. How about that?"

As Hana spoke, she typed a link into the address bar, bringing up a website giving the latest on the situation. Featured on the page were two different pictures of two different people—and while they had black lines obscuring their eyes, it was clear that they were the manga café employee and the girl who had taken Hatsuyama's picture.

“It’s them...” Hatsuyama murmured in shock. “How...?” she said, turning to Hana.

“Mmm... Oh, you know... I have my ways.”

Hana recalled the sour voice of Kunosato Mio, the girl she had asked for assistance. At first, the scientist had refused, *“You really think I care about your problems? Figure it out yourself,”* but when Hana brought up the fact that she and her friends had been taking turns visiting the hospital once a month to assist *her* with her research into CCS, Mio clicked her tongue in defeat. *“Send me a picture of yourself. A current one. People online love to laugh it up when there’s a single person—a ‘lolcow,’ they call it—but their tune changes when a second comes into the equation.”* Then, before Hana could get another word in, she had already hung up.

After the plan was put in place, all that remained was to sit back and watch it unfold. In no time at all, the collage of Hana had spread all across the internet, and immediately following it, a number of other posts began to creep up. “Someone is leaking the info of CCS patients without their consent,” they would say, and, faster than Hana could have ever anticipated, the employee who had leaked her and Hatsuyama’s information had his own leaked in turn.

When Hana had called her, Mio had given a response in which she acted as if she did not care in the slightest for Hana’s plight, but the brilliance displayed in her calculated moves spun a different tale.

Later that evening, Mio had contacted her once more to tell her the next stage. *“We’re now moving in on their socials. They should start pissing themselves at this point, which means it’s time for you to get a hold of the CCS patient advocacy group. I’ll send you an overview via email soon*—make sure *you contact them. If a woman picks up the phone, tell her to hand you off to a man. I’ll send you a list of the group members later so you get a better idea. The reason you want a male is because of your sex—when you get one, he’ll be inclined to make a move due to the dynamic. To make this more effective, pretend to be some fragile little bimbo crying about how hard it is for you to get the word out—that way, you can stroke his savior complex, and he’ll get a nice sense of satisfaction from helping you, making him more likely to do so.*

“Also, remind him that your student ID was illegally leaked, as that’ll give him an excuse to take official action. If the guy you end up on the phone with doesn’t seem like he knows his shit, tell him the employee violated Article 23 of the Personal Information Protection Law—be sure to familiarize yourself with that, just in case. Additionally, it’s against the manga café’s terms and conditions, too—see the third paragraph. After that, you and the group can do whatever the hell you want. Got it? Good. You’ll be staying overnight at the hospital next week. Don’t forget.”

Unsurprisingly, she had hung up before Hana got the chance to respond. Hana was in complete shock. *She’s totally insane...* she thought to herself. *Even I can tell she’s having fun with this.*

“Once the people who leaked our info know they’re screwed, it’ll be much less likely for anything like this to ever happen again,” she said.

“But... Hana... why did you... go this far... for me...?” Hatsuyama asked weakly.

“Someone had to do something.” Despite what she said, she herself hadn’t done anything—the real culprit behind it all was Mio—but that didn’t make Hana any less satisfied with the results. “Besides... this is nothing. Nothing at all.”

Compared to the decision Takuru had made, having a few silly pictures of herself circulating the internet was a drop in the bucket.

As Hana continued to stare at the monitor, Hatsuyama, meanwhile, stared at her instead; there was nothing but pure astonishment on her face.

“This is how we do things in the Newspaper Club. How *Takuru* did things,” Hana said. “That employee at the manga café, the girl who took a picture of you, the people who shared those pictures of us, and even the people who leaked the employee’s personal info—all of them just went with the explanation that was the easiest for them to swallow.”

Hana turned off the monitor. The uproar raging across the internet like any other passing trend would not stop just because she turned the screen to black—but, even so, there was no point in watching it progress.

Turning to face Hatsuyama, Hana continued. “That’s why I can’t let you make the same mistake. I don’t know what’s going through your head right now... but don’t make Takuru and Itou into something they’re not just to make your crappy life easier to swallow.”

With no rebuttal left to give, and with Hana’s eyes confronting her without reprieve, Hatsuyama began to tear up; perhaps seeking to avoid those very eyes boring into her, she looked down at the floor.

“Then... what am I supposed to do now...?” she said meekly.

“Mmm...”

In that moment, Hana recalled the time when she had been asked the exact same thing by an old friend of hers—her friend from the Kendo Club. They had used to be like sisters—that was, until Hana ripped her entire family apart with her voice. And after Hana destroyed her friend’s life, that friend asked her the exact same question Hatsuyama had—a question to which Hana had found herself unable to answer.

But this situation was not the same. *She* was not the same. Everything she had lived through—everything she had survived—together with her friends had changed her.

“You have to stand your ground,” she finally answered. “That’s what I’m going to do. While my pictures might not be spreading anywhere near as much as yours, we’re still in a very similar boat. So I’m just going to stand my ground and not give them an inch. The vast majority of those trolls just love making people suffer because they get a reaction out of it. So we won’t give them one. And if we don’t, they have no power over us.”

Stepping away from the computer, Hana headed for the door to the room. Just before she left, however, without turning around fully, she looked back at Hatsuyama one last time. “A friend once told me that, despite what people say,

friends aren't born—they're made. And that's what I'm trying to do now. I want to make friends. I want *you* to be my friend. But if you can't stand your ground—if you still use Takuru and Itou as a way to escape reality—then that's never going to happen. And I won't ever be your friend."

But Hatsuyama did not respond. She simply kept staring at the floor.

"Mizuki. I'm not going to force you to do anything. But if we can be friends, then that's what I want," Hana said. "Sorry for the dent."

And with those words, the door closed behind her.

On her way out of the house, rather than exchanging words with Hatsuyama's mother—something it was obvious the woman wanted to do—Hana simply bowed to her, and then, she left the Hatsuyama household behind.

A trace of regret weighed heavily on her mind as she left, but her throat had nearly been torn to shreds. She couldn't speak any longer, and as such, all she had left was one single thought.

I... I haven't talked that much since before I got CCS...

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The following day, break time arrived. As per usual, Hana was playing a game on her handheld console, when suddenly, a shadow overtook the screen. Upon looking up, she was surprised to find none other than Hatsuyama standing above her. Dumbfounded, Hana was at a loss for words.

Eventually, Hatsuyama broke the silence. "C'mon, say something."

"Mmm... I, uh... um..." Hana stammered.

Hatsuyama's hair was short, and she wasn't wearing glasses, either.

Perhaps it was because the two were simply staring at each other in silence—something that was definitely abnormal—but the other classmates around them were starting to stare as well.

"Is your eyesight good enough to not need your glasses?" Hana finally asked.

"20/20," Hatsuyama answered succinctly.

A short, strange pause occurred, before eventually, the two of them smiled from ear to ear.

"Are you gonna start going to club again?" Hana asked.

"Yup. That's the plan."

"Mmm. Hey, Mizuki? Do you have some time during lunch later today? I have a quick favor to ask."

Hatsuyama nodded yes in no time.

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Later that day, the two girls went to the Newspaper Club room during lunch break. Opening the door, they saw that Hinae and Senri were already seated, their lunches spread out across their desks.

When she realized who it was at the door, Hinae placed all of her weight against the back of her chair, leaned back in it, hiked up her skirt, and slammed both feet atop her desk.

“How dare you show your face around here, traitor?” she began. “Do you realize how sad you made me and Senri? The *agony* you put us through? Like, you couldn’t even be bothered to give us a call letting us know you were okay? Well, sucks for you, sister—the pasta was *to die for*. The sweet tarts we got for dessert were equally delicious—and cheap, too! But of course, that was obvious to me, as I went out of my way to scout the place out before. And in case you missed it, let me repeat myself: *I went. Out of my way. To scout the place out.* But you just *tossed* me aside like garbage! Why do I even bother?!”

“Arimura! You *will* mind your manners,” Senri said with a stomp of her foot, her gaze snapping to Hinae. Hinae meekly withdrew her feet from atop her desk.

Senri then turned back to the two girls. “Hatsuyama, I take it?”

Hatsuyama was taken aback by Hinae’s attitude, but, upon hearing Senri’s gentle voice addressing her, she nodded.

“Um, I need to talk to you about... club stuff,” Hana said to Senri. Taking out the club admission form that Hinae had given to her before, she presented it to the student council president.

Senri’s eyes widened. “Wait, you decided? What did you decide on?”

“Um, before I tell you, I have a question. Didn’t you say that both clubs and committees need five people to be official?”

“Yes, that’s the rule. Why do you ask?” Senri answered, raising her eyebrow.

Hekiho Academy was a fairly young school without much history to its name—so young, in fact, Senri was among its first generation of students. When it first opened, there had been no restrictions on the number of members required for clubs, committees, or other extracurricular groups, but now, a general rule had been established where at least five were required in order for it to operate in an official capacity.

“Well, Hatsuyama and I want to start a new club, and we wanna invite you to join. Hina too.” Hana said.

“I’m sorry?” Senri said, the surprise in her voice evident. Hinae, too, having previously been looking out the window, was astounded; she stared at Hana with her eyes wide as could be.

“We haven’t decided on the name yet, but we have tons of other things we plan to do already written out,” Hana said. She then handed over a piece of paper to Senri. Senri had been looking at Hana’s face as she spoke, but only once her gaze fell to the document did what her friend was saying truly register in her mind.

Examining it closely, she read it aloud. "'A club dedicated to improving the lives of and advocating for victims of Chaos Child Syndrome'...?"

Hana nodded. She could feel the surprise wafting off of Hatsuyama behind her as well. "Mm. I've been thinking a lot about what happened with Mizuki," Hana said.

Senri carefully examined the document—it contained only a rough outline, so it didn't take her especially long to read. Upon finishing it, she looked up at Hana. Reacting to her friend's unflinching gaze, Hana immediately went red—to this, Senri couldn't help the slight smile rising to her lips.

"I see. I think we can make it happen," she said. "That is, under one condition. But before I ask it of you... tell me: those events that took place yesterday... Ms. Kunosato had something to do with them, didn't she?"

Hana nodded; she had already known that Senri would be able to see right through it all. She had neglected to contact her and Hinae the day before, so the two had likely been following the events surrounding her on the internet—they had been worried, after all.

"We can't let something like that happen again," Senri said. "You know what will come of it should it escalate beyond a certain degree, so we cannot let it. Never again will I make that same mistake, and you will not either. Am I understood?"

"Yes." Hana said with a resolute nod—after all, she would have abided by that even without being asked.

"And one more thing—don't make it a club, make it a committee. The activities performed by committees directly affect the school as a whole, while clubs are more private in nature. Further, if you're placed under the student council's umbrella, it will be easier for me to work with you on certain matters, and it will be easier for Arimura to get permission to participate—considering she's already involved in one extracurricular activity," Senri said.

"H-Hey, I didn't say anything about joining!" Hinae protested; continuing to act in character, she started rocking back and forth in her chair once more, placing all her weight on the back of it. Hana and Senri ignored her.

"Well, Committee Chair... er, I suppose just President would be more proper—I will act as your vice president. Is that all right with you, Hatsuyama?" Senri asked.

"H-Huh?! You're asking me?!" Hatsuyama said, immediately straightening her posture. Rumors of the Empress seemed to be going just as strong as ever, even among the underclassmen.

"Am I correct in assuming you'll be joining us in this committee?"

"I... uh..." As Hatsuyama stammered, Hana turned to look at her. "Is this... the favor you were talking about?" Hatsuyama asked hesitantly.

Hana nodded. "You don't even have to show up—you can just *say* that you're in

it. I mean, since you're still in the Tennis Club and all," she said.

"Okay." Her expression as serious as could be, Hatsuyama agreed. "Even if I can't be there because of club, I'll make sure I come help out every now and then."

Hana nodded, thankful.

Before the registration could be complete, a special form had to be submitted in order to apply for the committee's establishment; on it, each pending member had to provide their signature. Hana, Senri, and Hatsuyama each wrote their names on the form, with the row for the president's name being at the very top; Hana felt oddly tickled when she realized her name was written above Senri's.

"You're next, Arimura," Senri said.

“Oh, you want my signature, do you? Hmm... Well, I think I’m owed a little somethin’ somethin’ first... but I dunno, you tell me,” said Hinae.

“Write your name down this instant,” Senri barked, and Hinae meekly did as she was told.

Grumbling as she wrote, she said, “Aw, c’mon... I was really riding on that...” Then, after handing over the finished application to Hana, Hinae turned her gaze back out the window once more. Her dissatisfactions had taken far deeper root than the group had initially expected.

I’ll have to treat her next time we go out, Hana thought to herself.

Perhaps mulling over something, Hatsuyama looked back and forth between Hana and Hinae, inspecting the two girls. Then, after a few more moments of this, she poked Hana in the shoulder. “Hey, so, I’ve got a question,” she said.

“Yeah?” Hana replied.

“Is she your best friend?”

“Pfft. No way.”

“*What?!* Okay, you know what?! Gimme that!” Hinae shouted, and her hands immediately went for the form—unfortunately for her, Hana deftly dodged the attack. However, right before Hinae was about to lean forward for another attempt, Senri grabbed her by the arm and forced her to sit down.

“Wait, don’t we need one more person?” Hatsuyama asked. “Or do you already have someone in mind?”

“Yeah, I do. She’s also in the Tennis Club. She already said she can join—albeit in name only, just like you,” Hana responded.

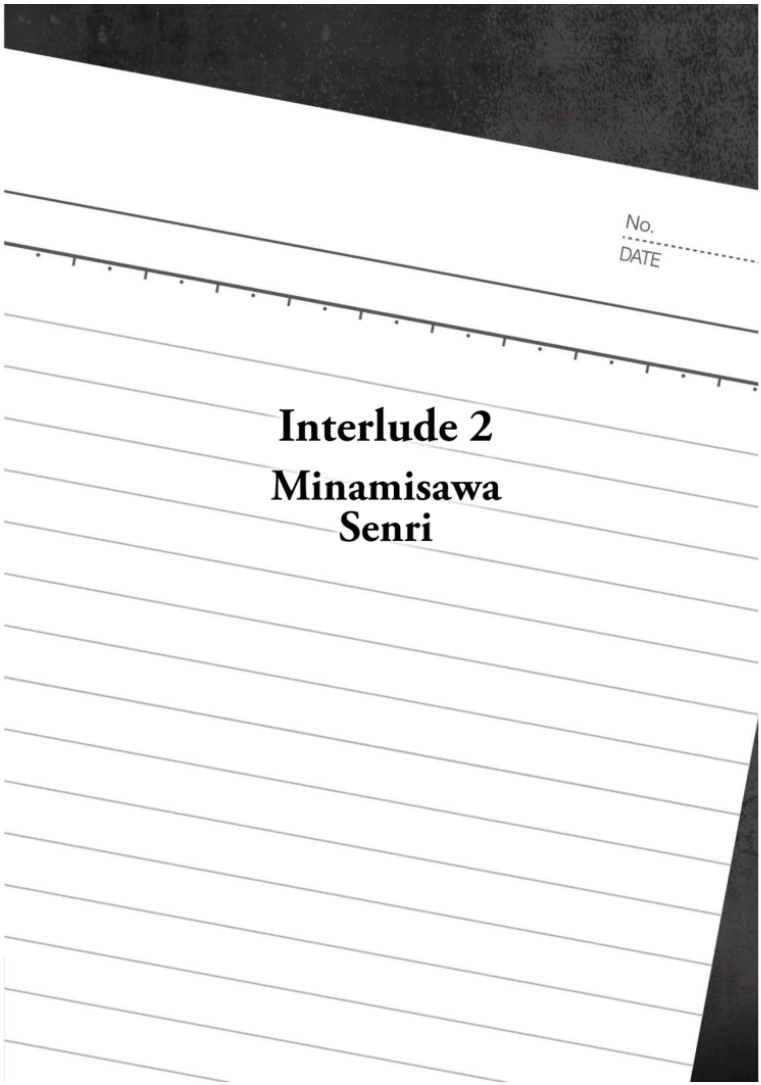
Hatsuyama took a moment to process this, but once she realized what was being implied, she let out a resounding “Oh!”

Senri looked slightly surprised, but it didn’t take long for her to nod in satisfaction. “All right, Kazuki, then you better go get that person to sign for you as soon as possible. Ideally, I would like it by today—that way, I can put it on the agenda for tomorrow’s student council meeting. If we manage that, I can get it approved and submit it to the school the following day,” she said. “I’m assuming the room we’re in right now will serve as the committee’s official room?”

Hana nodded.

“Well, before all that, let me give you your first and final warning: If you just stay holed up in here playing games all the time, the committee will be shut down before you can say ‘Game Over.’”

With a light shake of the head, Hana laughed. “Mm, I don’t think you have to worry. I’ll probably be too busy,” she said. “Besides, I want to go out and spend some time with my friends.”



Interlude 2

Minamisawa Senri

Dear Takuru,

After much deliberation, the name of the committee was finally decided: it will be known as the “Students for the Betterment of Student Autonomy and Conditions”—“SBSAC” for short.

As for how the school responded, they were overjoyed to hear that there was a group of students that was actively expressing interest in tackling these issues that plague the student body; parents have also responded to the idea quite favorably, with even the more, shall we say, *passionate* ones having proposed specific fields and activities the committee could tackle. It was clear to see that the reception of her committee, be it positive or not, left Kazuki feeling quite overwhelmed. On the very first day following its establishment, she immediately stated that she wanted to quit—I, however, nipped that right in the bud and encouraged her to press onward. Although I do sympathize—she was certainly hit with a great deal of work right off the bat.

There is one thing I must apologize for in regard to how the committee was established, however. Back when we submitted the application to the school, one of the teachers opposed to the committee brought up the Newspaper Club. They said, “With both the president and vice president being former members of the Newspaper Club, how can we be sure this won’t be another failure just like it?” That remark swayed the course of the conversation, which had been completely in our favor up to that point—the school reopened fairly recently, after all, and thus the faculty are very sensitive to events that may draw public attention.

So, for the sake of the committee, I was forced to say something I did not want to. “This will not be a club led by the felon Miyashiro Takuru, and thus your concerns have no bearing here.”

I spoke this loudly, and with eyes full of conviction so that it would not be discarded.

Even if I felt it necessary, I cannot convey how truly sorry I am.

With that now being said, let’s return to the topic at hand. Aside from Kazuki’s—admittedly frequent—bellyaching when faced with all the new weight on her shoulders, the actual activities performed by the committee have been going quite well. Presently, at least. Arimura has been helping out so much that I’ve found myself wondering if the Literature Club is truly her primary extracurricular commitment anymore. Additionally, we have been very blessed to have two of Kazuki’s friends—the ones I told you about previously—pitching in between Tennis Club meets.

Arimura and those two certainly provided quite the entertainment for a little while. At first, Arimura would sit beside Kazuki as brazenly as she could—almost like a general attempting to defend her territory from foreign invaders. However, if the two girls tried to talk to Kazuki anyway despite her presence, that attitude of hers would quickly crumble, and she would immediately go silent—before

eventually turning to me. Now, it's not like I don't understand the feeling of being a third wheel of sorts, but I've never had any desire to confront the girls and make the situation any more awkward, so I instead signal to her that she had to handle the situation herself. However, that meant the pot was left to simmer...

As a result, one day, Arimura suddenly came out and said, "Okay, I can't do this anymore! Everybody? I've decided that we're gonna hold the very first SBSAC Karaoke Competition!" She then grabbed me and Kazuki—despite us both being very opposed to the idea (and without an ounce of spending money to our names)—dragged us off to a karaoke booth with the other girls, and locked us inside. "Our butts aren't leaving this booth till we've sung at least ten songs! *Each!*"

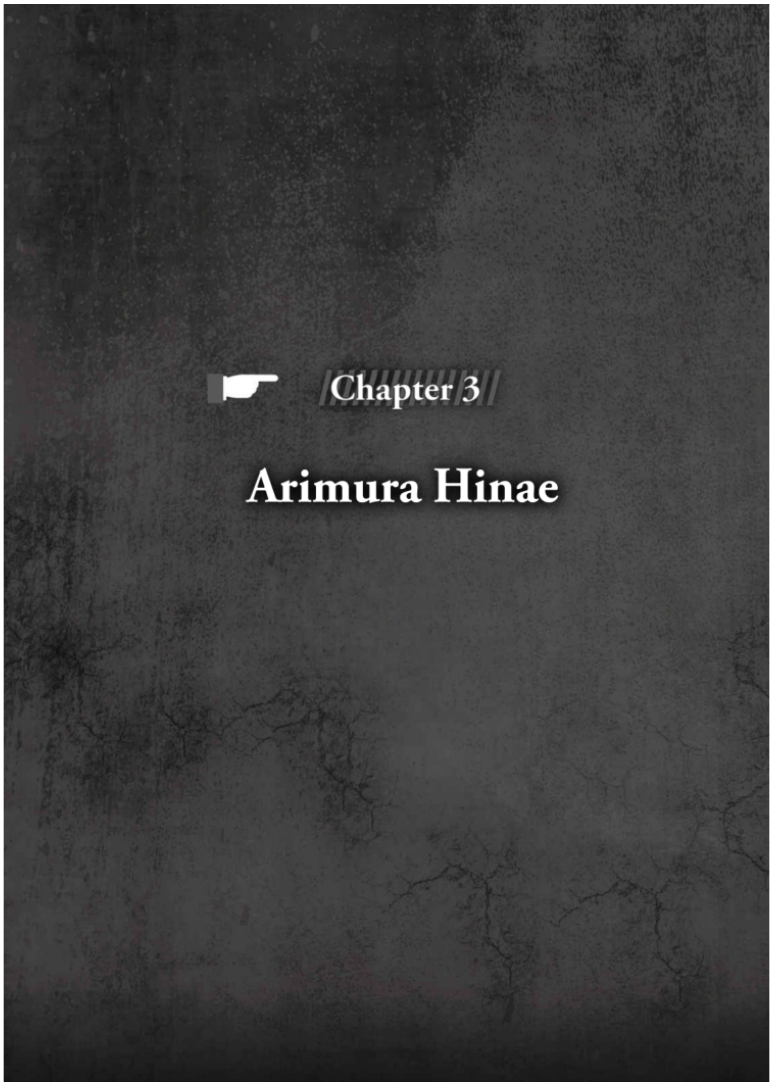
I knew she had a strong desire to grow closer to the two girls, so I just threw my hands up and went along with it. Problem was, there were five of us in total, which meant we had to sing fifty songs. Yes, *fifty*. It took five and a half hours to get through it all, and at the end, I came very close to holding a tearful memorial for my wallet... Regardless of the financial consequences, though, I must admit—I did have a great time. It was an especially nice surprise to see that, despite Kazuki being so vehemently against it, she was actually quite good at singing—even if her volume was a tad on the low side.

Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever been to karaoke with you before. What kind of songs do you tend to sing when you go? Me, personally, I only know things that are on the older side. You know, the classics. When I was told it was my turn to sing ten songs, I managed to scrape by for a while by singing a few newer songs I had heard once or twice, but even though I had the other four helping me, halfway through my ten "reps," I was forced to give up.

I can't say it's a topic I have all that much investment in, but here's another funny story from that day. As we were singing, Arimura went off on a tirade in which she criticized the shallow lyrics of the latest song that had been sung, and Kazuki's two friends rushed to defend them. From there, a fierce argument sprung forth, and while normally you'd assume that would be a bad thing—surprisingly, no! It actually turned out to be the perfect thing to get them talking. So perfect, in fact, that the very next day, they all started chatting away with each other like it was nobody's business. Very eventful, as you can see!

Oh, yes... One last thing before I let you go. This one's related to just me this time. Now, how do I go about saying this...

Today, a boy in my class confessed his feelings for me.


Chapter 3
Arimura Hinae

As she and her teacher continued their war of silence, Arimura Hinae searched through the annals of her mind to try and recall the contents of the novel she was currently carrying around in her bag.

It was a particularly bad tendency of hers. Any time Hinae thought about the novel she was currently reading rather than her own novel that she was writing, it was a sign that she was feeling far from her best—and considering she had been unable to write even a single word since the case, she hadn't been feeling well for a long time. Ever since the murders had come to an end, all she had been able to do was read—something that had long since begun to wear on her.

Currently, Hinae was located in the teacher's lounge. She was standing next to her homeroom teacher, with him sitting in a chair at his desk, tapping away at the sleek wooden top with a pen. A single blank worksheet sat on the center of the desk; specifically, it was a survey that asked students what they planned to do in their future.

Guess I've just gotta stick it out... Hinae thought to herself. Staring at the large windowpane, Hinae frowned at the reflection looking back at her. "Okay, I've still got time though, right? It's not due till the assembly at the end of the term," she said to her teacher.

"Everyone's turned it in except for you. Best I can do is say you only have to pick two colleges instead of the expected three," he responded.

"I haven't even figured out if I'm *going* to college yet!"

"You realize everyone in this class except you has already chosen that option, right?"

Yeah, I know, Hinae conveyed with an annoyed nod.

On the worksheet, students were required to either circle "pursuing higher education" or "finding a job," and when it came to Hinae's classmates, not a single one of them had picked the latter option. Because of this, all students had to fill in at least three different universities or vocational schools they intended on pursuing.

Recognizing the lack of change in her response, Hinae's teacher stopped tapping his pen for a moment to look at her. Then, with an expression of obvious exasperation on his face, he handed the worksheet back to Hinae. "You have until the end of the week to decide. Get on it."

The assembly would not be happening until Monday, but regardless, Hinae tucked the form into her bag without protest, and gave a simple "Okay." Then, as she ran through an array of motivational sayings in her head in an attempt to motivate herself, with a grateful bow, she made to leave the teacher's lounge.

"Oh, right!" the teacher called after her. "You better put your all into that speech you guys are doing for the committee. Everyone's parents are expecting a whole lot from you."

Turning her head around to face him, Hinae gave him a quick, "Yup, goooot it,"

then closed the door to the teacher's lounge. Then, without skipping a beat, she immediately stuck out her tongue. *Yeah, I don't need anyone to tell me to put my all into it, thanks.*

Upon arriving at her usual hangout spot, i.e., the former Newspaper Club room that was now the SBSAC room, Hinae found Senri furiously tapping away at the keyboard of her laptop. Stacks upon stacks of papers were piled up beside her—a heap that seemed to have grown even taller than it had been before Hinae had been called to the teacher's lounge. "Ciao, every *Juan*! I'm back!" Hinae exclaimed, only to realize something. "Where's Hana?"

"She slammed down a stack of papers with our requested feedback then promptly left the room," Senri answered.

"Oh. What about Mizuki and co.?"

"They also gave their fair share of paperwork, but I know they had a Tennis Club meet to get to. Apparently, they'll be bringing even more back with them later..."

It was quite the rare sight to see Senri grumbling about extra work; her clear signs of exhaustion were practically alien as far as Hinae was concerned.

Upon examining the papers, Hinae realized that it hadn't just been her imagination—the pile had indeed grown even bigger. Grabbing a handful of them at random, she migrated over to the computer that had already been installed in the clubroom prior to the committee's establishment and started up Macrosoft Axcel. Then, in spite of her feeling that she would never finish the sheet no matter how much she filled it out, she started typing the contents of the documents she had picked up into it.

"My homeroom teacher rode my ass again about my speech. Said that a whole bunch of parents are looking forward to it or whatever," Hinae said.

"I'm guessing that means the school is still getting a number of phone calls," Senri responded.

It had been a few weeks since SBSAC had been founded, and the workload that came with it had far exceeded the group's initial expectations—they had all been kept extremely, extremely busy. But the workload was not normal for a club or committee—it was particular to SBSAC, and in fact, it could be traced back to a fairly innocent question: upon becoming president, the first thing Hana had said was, "I want to hear what everyone in the school thinks about CCS. I want to know their thoughts and feelings on every part of it." Without even having to think about it, Hinae and Senri gave their approval. The committee had been established under the original topic of "A committee dedicated to improving the lives of and advocating for victims of Chaos Child Syndrome," and Hana's idea seemed appropriate as a first step toward tackling that.

And so, with the school's permission, the committee's establishment was announced to all students, and a survey was distributed to each one soon after. It was a fairly vague set of questions, with it simply asking students to write about anything they wished to regarding CCS, and yet, the newly founded committee

found themselves with an unexpectedly large collection of responses. Submissions were entirely optional, but, in spite of this fact, a considerable number of papers were delivered to the meeting room on the very first day. Perhaps this was because the students had many more feelings to express on CCS than initially expected—or perhaps it was because of Senri's powerful influence as the Empress in action, with her simple request of "Please take the time to fill this out," being perceived as more coercive than intended.

With each passing day, their stacks of papers only grew and grew; with each submission, the club members lamented that they had not asked for the forms to be submitted via email instead. As one might imagine, the deluge of responses began to dwindle after a few weeks, but even after that much time had passed, there was still no end to the number of students who asked for another sheet of paper just so they could include the full width of their responses—despite having already used the back side of the sheet.

The committee also began to interview students directly, be it because they wished to confirm the veracity of the more dubious or hyperbolic responses, or simply because they wished to hear more. Somewhere along the way, a rumor began to spread that a research committee was going around interviewing people and answering questions about CCS; as it made the rounds, the club members began to find themselves being approached at random, and at a far greater rate than before. Even though the rumor wasn't exactly true, they figured they had plenty to gain by leaving it be, so they opted not to correct the misinformation. However, as a result of this inaction, the school faculty caught wind of what was happening, and once they noticed how large the study had grown, they immediately told the committee to announce the results of their research during the end-of-year assembly—a request that was nonnegotiable.

In order to take on this high workload, Hinae and the others divided themselves into two groups. The first-years—Hana, Hatsuyama Mizuki, and one more girl who had joined the committee, Nitani Machi—were in charge of interviews. Hinae and Senri, meanwhile, were tasked with converting the results of the interviews and surveys into measurable, observable data. Hana was far faster at typing than Hinae was, so she was quite adamant that she should've been doing that job instead—however, she quickly relented when Senri told her, "You are the president of this committee; you should be the one to lead the interviews and all other tasks."

It had become apparent that either the school or the students themselves had informed their parents about how the results of the study were to be announced at the assembly, as the committee had been receiving nonstop phone calls asking for further details.

Without halting her typing, Hinae broke the silence. "Hey, so, uh, random question, but... What're all the seniors planning to do after they graduate?"

"How do you mean?" Senri responded.

"You know, like, are they going off to college? Or are most people planning to get a job?"

“Seems like most of them are going off to college. I could probably count the number of people saying they’re going straight into work on one hand.” Senri paused for a moment before continuing. “In all honesty, I don’t really know what to expect once graduation comes around.”

It was currently December of 2016, meaning Hinae was a second-year, and Senri a third-year. If they had been living normal lives up until that point, Senri would have already graduated from school back in March, and Hinae would have entered her third year in April. However, due to CCS and the extensive amount of effort rehabilitation required, when Hekiho Academy reopened, all students had been placed in the same grade they had been in prior to their hospitalization. And since there had been hardly any time at all between the time the syndrome had taken hold and graduation, Senri and the other third-years were required to attend school for one additional year.

“By the time it does, the students in my year will be twenty years old. I’m sure everyone will have something in mind for their futures by that point,” Senri continued.

“Speaking of—no one’s really settled on a name for you guys. What should we call you? Fourth-years? Like, once next April rolls around, I mean,” Hinae said.

Senri shrugged.

In April of 2017, the third-year students from the junior high school segment of the academy would be joining the first-year students in the high school division; this meant that there would temporarily be four different years of students in the high school segment.

“It’s wild, right? Like, in what world would the two of us be graduating at the same time?” Hinae said.

“It’ll likely only be our year. I don’t know how things will progress as time moves forward—be it in regard to the law or just in general—but it’s entirely possible you’ll also have to attend four years as well.”

“Maybe you’ll be one of the first-ever fifth-years.”

“I sure hope not...” Senri grumbled, and Hinae responded with a smile that was just as grim.

The reason why the situation had become so complicated was because the lawmakers had yet to decide how exactly to deal with the ex-CCS patients. Many students were choosing to pursue higher education due purely to the belief that they would face less discrimination doing so than they would going straight into the workforce. Additionally, while a history of “mental illness” was unlikely to affect their eligibility for admission when applying to universities, vocational schools, etc., the same could not be said for attempting to find employment.

CCS was not a very well understood syndrome, with the broad public perception stopping at it merely being some type of mental illness; some even questioned whether Hekiho Academy should even be considered a proper private school, citing the fact that it existed solely for the minority with the syndrome.

Gazing down at her pile of paperwork that did not seem to be shrinking one bit, Hinae let out a big sigh. “What are we gonna do...?” she said.

“That’s an excellent question... One which I don’t have an answer for,” Senri replied.

After sitting in silence for a few moments, Senri rose from her seat to go make a pot of coffee; perhaps the fatigue was getting to her. Once it was finished brewing, she handed a cup of it to Hinae, who gave a short “Thanks.” For some reason, though, it seemed as if Senri was deliberately avoiding meeting her clubmate’s eyes. As well as this, instead of returning to her seat, she chose to remain standing beside Hinae as she drank her coffee.

Hinae looked up at the tired girl, once again thinking to herself how unusual she was acting—she was hesitating for some reason, as if unsure on how to broach a certain subject. This left Hinae feeling somewhat sullen—even though Senri often played the role of the dependable older sister, in a moment like this, she seemed to be able to swap to the opposite end of the spectrum on a dime. Despite her age, she was like an adorable younger sister—and it just wasn’t fair.

“What’s up?” Hinae asked. Senri did not respond immediately to her, still looking as if she was greatly troubled by something.

Eventually, Senri tightly coiled her hands around her cup of coffee, directed her gaze down to the dark liquid, and spoke. “So, um... Have you responded to the boy who confessed to you yesterday?”

“Huh...?” The suddenness of that statement made Hinae’s eyes go wide—a reaction that had Senri almost just as surprised. “Wait, what?” she said.

“Huh? Didn’t someone confess to you yesterday?”

“Well, yeah, but...” Hinae trailed off.

The confession had come from a boy in the same year as her. He was a friend of a friend, and although they were in different classes, Hinae had known of him for a good while by then.

“Well, uh... the reason I ask is... yesterday, someone confessed to me too,” Senri admitted.

“Someone *what*?!” Hinae exclaimed.

Clarifying, Senri went on to explain that, after confessing to her, the boy told her something. *“Oh yeah, Miss Empress? I’m not the only one confessing to my crush today, actually—my friend from a year under me’s gonna do it too. He’s got the hots for your friend, Arimura—he probably already talked to her by now.”* The two boys had planned to confess their feelings at the same time, with the goal of setting up a double date that weekend.

Hinae was taken aback. “Okay, what?”

“Did you turn him down?” Senri asked.

“Well, duh. And you turned the other guy down, right?”

Senri awkwardly averted her eyes, which only added to Hinae's shock. Her facial expression had completely changed, and she leaned forward in her seat with eyes as wide as could be.

"I... told him I would think about it," Senri said sheepishly.

There's no shot... Hinae thought to herself, speechless. She never would have thought in a million years that Senri would have made such a decision.

"You're serious?" Hinae said. "Okay... what's your plan, then? What're you thinking?"

"I... I was thinking I might try and go on a date or two with him."

"Do you, uh... like him?"

As she spoke, Hinae noticed that her voice had fallen significantly both in tone and energy—but there was nothing she could do to stop that from happening. Any form of conversation that had to do with love was one that she found herself utterly unable to engage with emotionally.

"Not really, no..." Senri answered.

"Okay, then why bother?" Hinae's tone had now become outright aggressive, causing Senri's face to cloud. Instead of responding, she took a slow sip from her cup of coffee, steadily sat down in the chair nearest to her, and began fidgeting with her hands. Perhaps she herself did not know the answer.

After a few moments passed, she finally found a response. "It's hard... I can't really think of anything to say. I don't know."

In that moment, her voice lacked the confidence and strength that it always held.

"I think... it's the thought that... even though I've been through so much... even after everything, there are people at this school who accept me like this."

"Like this?" Hinae asked. "You mean... that body?"

Senri nodded.

During the long period of time that she had been suffering from CCS, in addition to the signs of rapid aging particular to the syndrome, Senri had experienced a unique phenomenon—one in which she had physically changed her appearance into that of her late friend, Kurusu Nono. Upon recovering from the syndrome, her rapid aging improved greatly, but in addition, she switched back to her original body. Ever since then, she had been faced with a dilemma: everyone in her life had known her only as Nono, and thus, she did not know if it was even possible for her to live as her original self anymore.

In Hinae's eyes, this was an entirely reasonable worry to have. After all, even those who did know Senri's circumstances had had extreme difficulty accepting the truth of her identity, as well as the truth of the case that came with it—so of course she was justified in being concerned with whether those who didn't know anything would be willing to accept her.

To combat this, Senri slowly began to seek understanding from her peers. She started with her friends in the same year as her, then those she had interacted with from other years, then those who had been in rehab at the same time as her. To each of them, she explained that, while she could not tell them the whole truth, her body had changed due to the syndrome. Hinae and the others did their best to help with this effort.

By the time she was discharged from the hospital, Senri had done enough where at least those at school who were close to her would no longer call her by her previous name.

“His name is Masuda. He’s a classmate of mine,” Senri explained. “He used to see me only as Nono, but now, he sees me as Senri—and Senri alone... Well, he still calls me ‘Empress,’ actually, no matter how many times I’ve told him not to...” Senri hesitated for a moment. “And... well... it’s the first time a boy has ever told me he liked me. As Senri.”

“Huh...” Hinae said.

“That’s why I wanted to think about it a little before I gave him a proper answer—and why I was considering a date.” A complex smile shone on Senri’s face. “I’ll admit I don’t really understand it, but that’s what I think my logic is.”

Growing increasingly uncomfortable, Hinae tried to look at Senri, only to immediately avert her eyes once more. Her mind traveled back to when she herself had been confessed to; as she thought back on that moment, Hinae felt as if she was in a completely different world from her friend. To her, it even felt like Senri was telling her this as a show of her strength and resolve. It all swirled together in her mind.

“Senri?” Taking care to make her voice sound as neutral as possible, Hinae asked Senri a question. “If I asked you how you felt about Takuru, what would you say?”

Without skipping a beat, Senri replied, “I would say I love him very deeply.”

“As a brother...? Or as something else?”

“Hmm... I wonder about that.”

“Are you actually not sure?”

“What about you? What do you think of him?”

Hinae sharply recoiled. Then, after hesitating for a moment, she said, “I don’t *not* like him.”

“Do you mean that... as a potential romantic partner? Or as a good friend?”

It was a very abrupt question using a very specific choice of words—words Hinae well understood the nuance of.

With a resolute nod, Hinae answered the question firmly. “As a good friend. He’s not just a normal friend—he’s more than that. Whether I mean that romantically, though... I don’t really know.”

Senri's smile deepened. "Well, as his older sister, I can tell you that you have my full blessing," she said. "Thank you for being so kind to him, Arimura."

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Upon returning to her current place of residence, Hinae found her aunt and uncle waiting for her at the dinner table. Gazing at the food on offer, she saw that all there was was radish and mushroom miso soup, and immediately let out a sigh —but not one big enough to be noticed. This was the third day in a row that they had eaten that same meal.

"School's definitely keeping you busy."

"The school sent us a notice about this one new committee. That's the one you're involved in, right?"

Each time her uncle and aunt-in-law tried to make conversation with her, Hinae simply responded with the same smile and a small catalog of light, inoffensive replies. She was well aware that they were paying close attention to her and her responses; even the choice in meal must have been because she had said that it was her favorite. As for whether it truly was—she did not dislike it, but she did not particularly enjoy it, either. The first time they'd made it—three days prior—they had asked her how she liked the taste, and she'd found herself saying that it was her favorite without any real thought behind it.

Returning to her room, Hinae lay down on her bed. Retrieving her phone, she then brought up the contact information for a boy named Ishiwata Keisuke. It was the boy who had confessed to her. She could not remember when the two had exchanged numbers; in all likelihood, it had been back when she had still been under the influence of CCS—when she had been able to tell whether someone was lying or telling the truth.

The confession had taken place behind the school campus after classes had come to an end. The boy's mouth had been trembling as he'd tried to work up the courage, but eventually, he'd managed to squeeze out the words he had been wanting to say for so long.

"Arimura, I've liked you for a really long time. Please go out with me!"

"Oh... yikes... Sorry, but I've already got my eye on someone else. I'm sure you're great, though!"

Remembering what she'd said to the poor boy, Hinae violently shoved her face into her pillow; pressing so hard she couldn't breathe, she kicked her legs back and forth on her bed.

It had been a lie. At the time the boy confessed, Hinae had not had anyone she was romantically interested in—yet she'd said it all the same. The boy had clearly been shocked by her saying she already had someone, and then, his face had contorted in anguish.

"What the hell is my *probleeeeem*?" Hinae moaned into her pillow.

Ever since Hekiho Academy had reopened, Hinae had been socializing with her friends as if no time had passed at all. However, while she was performing with the same upbeat personality as always, in her mind, it was far from the same. Perhaps she had grown so accustomed to having CCS that, now that she could no longer tell when someone was lying or not, she had been cast into unfamiliar waters.

In the past, Hinae would rarely show any sincerity, instead choosing to communicate almost entirely through jokes and sarcasm. Now that she no longer had her powers, however, she was being presented with far more opportunities to show her true self and deepen her relationships—though the process was slow going. The only people with whom she could communicate without any reservations were her friends with whom she had experienced the case, with Hana in particular being the easiest. Yet, in spite of these reservations holding her back, she had still managed to develop a far closer relationship with her other friends than she ever had before. Before, her relationships with those uninvolved with the case had always been shallow and fake, but now, they had transformed into much deeper, true friendships. For Hinae, this change was a very extreme one.

The distance between Hinae and her aunt and uncle had also lessened in the wake of the syndrome. The three family members had always cared for one another, but only at a base level—this much had not changed especially, but even going the slightest bit beyond this had not been possible when Hinae had been suffering from CCS. Before, she would never have even dreamed that the three of them would have attempted to grow closer, let alone without any form of pushback from Hinae. After all, relationships that only existed due to social constructions and traditions—the people with whom you only gave robotic responses, and thus received the same in turn—were the ones that Hinae had once hated the most.

Even her parents that had previously been entirely estranged had started to reach out to her over the phone, albeit only occasionally.

Hinae had thought that she had already left her past behind—her previous self behind. But when she'd heard that boy's confession, her immediate response had not had even a single ounce of sincerity behind it. It had been nothing but a random mess of words she had thrown together without a second thought.

"God, I hate this..." Hinae murmured.

It was exactly the same as how she'd used to act. Discarding all truth, she simply surrendered herself to the mood and flow of whatever conversation she found herself in, all while distancing herself and her true feelings as much as possible. That had been how she'd survived. But it wasn't needed anymore.

And yet, even so, she had given the boy nothing more than a stock response she had thrown together in her mind—one devoid of all emotion or feeling. And when the boy heard that from her, his face had turned to one of true, gut-wrenching pain.

She had hurt him.

Hinae began to wonder what she had really been thinking in that moment. Perhaps she had unconsciously compared the boy toward the other boy Senri had been asking her about before: her good friend, Takuru. However, Senri was far closer to Takuru than Hinae was, and yet, when faced with her confessor, Senri had still given him a proper response; she had thought about her current state and whether she was able to give him an answer that was both fair to him and true to her own feelings.

Hinae's thoughts then turned to Uki—and how she would always lament how she could never measure up to her older sister.

Vigorously launching up on the bed, Hinae retrieved her cell phone once again and punched the call button.

"Hello? Ishiwata? It's Arimura."

She quickly told him why she was calling then immediately hung up. Then, out of habit, Hinae took the book she had been reading out of her bag and began to run her eyes along the many lines of text. It featured a female protagonist who had feelings for two different men, and thus found herself in the midst of a love triangle. The irony was not lost on Hinae.

And yet, no matter how many lines her eyes swam over the page, not a single word ever registered in her mind.

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Arriving at the place where she was set to meet Senri, the moment Hinae caught sight of her in the distance, she squinted in stark confusion.

"Uh, Senri?" Hinae said, walking up to her.

"Yes?"

"What's up with the outfit? And, uh, the makeup..."

"Well, you see... Ms. Komori was particularly enthusiastic this morning, and... I'm afraid Uki got carried away along with her. This is the result."

On a normal day, Senri's face would've been partially hidden by her bangs, but it was entirely visible today. Tied off with a scrunchie, her hair was instead parted to the side, where it trailed down her front past her chest. As for makeup, Senri would typically only use primer and lipstick, but today, not only was she wearing mascara, but she had some light blush on her cheeks, too—together, these two things gave her a much more mature aura. Additionally, while she was wearing the same coat she usually did, the clothes peeking out from around her neck were brightly colored and looked quite expensive—both things that were atypical for her. Then, to top it all off, she was wearing a pair of high-heeled boots—also atypical for her. Very, very atypical.

Senri had arrived early—as per usual—to their meeting, but for some reason, her shoulders were slumped. She must have been exhausted.

"I didn't even know you *had* clothes like that," Hinae remarked.

“Well, you aren’t wrong—aside from the jacket, everything is Ms. Komori’s. That includes the makeup,” Senri explained. “It’s the craziest thing... She even went out of her way to buy these boots yesterday. I don’t know what came over her.”

Looking her outfit up and down, Hinae asked if she had been hit by a tornado, to which Senri explained that she had spent nearly the entirety of last night and that morning as a dress-up doll for Uki and Ms. Komori. This left Yuto in an awfully unfortunate position, as the girls forced him to give his opinion on Senri’s appearance several times throughout; the thought of this made Hinae snicker.

Right as the clock struck the time that had been set, two boys arrived on the scene: Masuda Kota, the boy who had confessed to Senri, and Ishiwata Keisuke.

In a fairly tactless display, Kota reacted with intense surprise upon seeing her. “Uh, Empress? What’s with the getup? You even changed your hair...” he said. “Actually, you know what? I’m kind of into it.”

Kota was a boy of about average height, yet with a rather stocky build. A pair of black-rimmed glasses sat atop his nose, and hiding behind them was a pair of large, beady eyes. Complete with hair that was practically indistinguishable from bedhead, he was a generally attractive boy.

“Please don’t talk about it... My family did this to me. And stop calling me Empress,” Senri said irritably.

Keisuke, on the other hand, was far more put together; he was practically the dictionary definition of “well-dressed.” Standing at over 180 centimeters, he was tall and slender, and his hair neat and tidy—this was in spite of the fact that he had not done anything in particular to it to make it so.

With a smile of resignation, Keisuke looked at Hinae. “Hey, Arimura? I’m assuming the answer’s still no?” he said.

“Yup. Sorry, but Hinae don’t need no man,” Hinae replied curtly.

Asking the two boys how they knew each other, they revealed that they had been friends since elementary school; they’d lived quite close to each other ever since they were young, and their families knew each other very well.

“Oh, yeah, might as well apologize... We would take you somewhere better, but neither of us really, uh, know anywhere else to go...” Masuda said sheepishly. Keisuke, agreeing with the sentiment, bowed his head in apology.

The place the four were meeting early that afternoon was right in front of the ever-popular Shibuya Station; the time and place had been left entirely up to the two boys, as well as any further activities over the course of the day. They looked genuinely sorry that they hadn’t been able to come up with anything better, so Hinae decided to ease the tension with a smile and an, “Eh, it’s cool.”

The first place the boys took the girls to was a planetarium located about five minutes away from the station.

“Are you a big space guy?” Hinae asked Keisuke.

“Nah, we just figured that a movie would be too long, but the showing here wouldn’t be so bad. It also won’t be as crowded,” he answered with a sheepish smile.

Huh, Hinae thought to herself. *That’s funny—that’s the kind of stuff I tend to think about when planning a date...*

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Upon leaving the planetarium, Hinae admitted to herself—once she’d actually gone inside, it hadn’t actually been too bad. Perhaps it was because she hadn’t been there since elementary school, but, even though it had been nothing more than a simple commentary on tonight’s starry sky, she’d found herself enjoying it far more than she’d expected—to the point where it had been refreshing, even.

Next on the list was a general store and a music shop. When she heard what the plan was, Hinae wondered if the boys were even interested in shopping. Figuring they must’ve chosen it out of consideration for her and Senri, she decided to simply accept the gesture and enjoy herself.

On the way to the store, the conversation Hinae had with Keisuke was actually quite nice. Hinae had expected him to go a lot more on the offensive—asking a lot of questions and whatnot—but she was surprised to find that he was actually fairly reserved. Hinae appreciated that. Nothing about it was forced.

Senri and Masuda, meanwhile, had a fairly different dynamic: Masuda was the one doing most of the talking, while Senri seemed to just roll her eyes and brush him off. Additionally, Masuda was fairly energetic and did a lot of goofing around, so Senri would simply sigh and say, “You’re ridiculous...” each time. The two seemed very comfortable with each other, as if their dynamic had long since been established—perhaps during their time together at school.

The general store was located on an upper floor of a building near Inokashira-dori, a street on the other side of the station; it was about a ten minute walk from the planetarium.

Entering the building, the four reached an elevator. However, the moment the elevator doors to the building opened—the moment they saw what was hanging in the back of it—the four teens immediately winced. The reason for this was very clear.

Sensing the probing gazes of the other patrons that were waiting behind them, Hinae took a breath and entered the elevator. The other three then followed without saying a word.

“So. Why are we here? Are the two of you closet shopaholics or something?” Hinae asked Keisuke, poking fun at him.

“Feels weird to admit this, but no—I’ve never even been to one of these before,” he answered. Everyone gave a small laugh.

Once they arrived at the actual store proper, Hinae and Senri began to browse the various goods. Before long, a memo holder with a rabbit motif caught Hinae’s

eye. She then asked Senri if Uki and Yuto were still trying to "con her into getting them a bunny," to which Senri sighed and said, "Yes... They've even gone as far as to come up with a list of names for them—both for a boy and a girl."

As for the two boys, as Hinae had predicted, they were left with not much to do. So, using their clearly bored faces as a catalyst, the four all left the general store earlier than initially planned.

On the way out, the four of them silently opted to take the stairs instead. None of them felt like taking that elevator again.

After browsing the music shop that was situated not too far from the general store, the four went a little farther north toward an ethnic restaurant along Koen-dori. It was a fairly stylish locale, with sofas of various sizes arranged unevenly throughout the store; aside from a few seats up at the counter, they served as the only seats for customers. All together, the decor and the fairly quiet ambient music gave the place a nice, unique atmosphere. Keisuke claimed to visit this restaurant fairly often.

Hinae was initially unsure if this was the best spot, but after taking one look at the menu, she changed her mind; the prices were a little too high for a group of high school students to eat there on a daily basis, but nearly every dish was accompanied by a note that made it very clear that the portion sizes were very large. Perhaps experiencing the same thought process as her, Senri turned to Hinae and shot her a wry smile.

It was around 3:00 PM, meaning it was well past lunchtime; however, despite this, several young people—both couples and individuals alike—dotted the various couches. This was especially surprising as the restaurant was open until midnight on the weekends, yet people had chosen now to enjoy their meals.

Eventually, Hinae settled on a bowl of taco rice, but upon Keisuke's adamant suggestion, she decided to split it with Senri due to the incredibly large portion size.

"So... how do you two know each other?" Keisuke asked.

"How do you think? From school, dummy," Hinae replied.

"Well, obviously—you're in the same committee. But I mean, like, before that. Have you been friends for a long time?"

"Nah. Just since high school."

"Arimura's the head of the Literature Club, and I'm the president of the Student Council. It was inevitable we'd come into contact at some point," Senri reasoned.

Right then, Hinae realized that Senri was purposefully supplementing the story she was spinning—and she'd managed to do so without outright lying, too.

"Gotcha," Keisuke said with a nod. "Speaking of the committee—you're going surprisingly hard when it comes to that, Arimura."

"What do you mean '*surprisingly*'?" Hinae pushed back.

“I mean, you just never used to seem like the kind of person to do this kinda thing is all. Or at least you wouldn’t go this hard.”

Hinae grumbled audibly; Senri, meanwhile, happily chimed in, “*Someone’s* been paying close attention to her, I see.”

Embarrassed, Keisuke scratched the back of his head in an attempt to dodge the accusation. “Well, I guess there isn’t anyone in Hekiho who hasn’t changed at least a *little* bit...”

Everyone fell silent.

After a few moments passed, Masuda let out a quiet, “Fair enough.” His face had stiffened greatly, and Hinae imagined that she likely was the same.

Taking a sip from her large cup of lassi, Hinae heard a couple sit down at a table nearby. Turning to look at them, she saw two people who were the same age as she was, i.e., high school students. She then managed to overhear what they were talking about: higher education, jobs, and their futures.

Hinae’s stomach began to churn; perhaps this showed on her face, as it wasn’t long before she felt Senri lightly elbow her. Rubbing her eyes, Hinae returned her gaze to the group. Both of the boys looked somewhat uncomfortable now.

Following a few more moments of awkward silence, Keisuke changed the subject. “So, uh... have you guys gotten any kind of messages from our parents?” he asked, likely referring to his and Masuda’s parents. “Like, have they asked the committee for anything?”

Hinae answered louder than usual in an attempt to drown out the couple’s voices. “Yeah, we get plenty. Must be our lucky day, too, as they seem like they’re the type to go directly to the school... Everybody loves a PTA mom.”

“Yeah... Sorry...”

“Huh? Sorry for what?”

“My mom. She’s always been like that—she kind of goes crazy over stuff like this. She went and got together a bunch of other parents, forming some stupid group thing, and now they’re just doing whatever. I mean, just the other day, she —” Keisuke’s voice caught in his throat, and his face twisted. He quickly grabbed his cup of water and took a sip in an attempt to disguise his slipup.

“Wait, finish your sentence,” Hinae demanded.

“No, it’s not that big of a deal. Forget what I said. We’re on a date, so let’s just not talk about that stuff.”

“Don’t be silly,” Senri interjected. “You’re just talking about the committee and CCS. It’s not like those aren’t normal things for us—so just say what you were meaning to say.”

Keisuke still seemed hesitant, but when Senri prompted him further with a flick of her hand, he relented. “Yeah, all right... Seriously, it’s not that big of a deal, though,” he said. He then took a breath. “Okay, so, a little while back, Ko and I

were looking for a part-time job, and we found this convenience store, right?"

"Ko?" Hinae said.

Masuda pointed to himself. "That's me. Kota Masuda. Ko. You get it."

"Yeah. Anyway, it's a pretty nice place. Owner's pretty young, actually. It would've worked great for us. So when we told them we wanted to work there, they hired both of us on the spot. They were really short-staffed, I guess, so they were pretty stoked to see people interested," Keisuke said. "They then said they'd need our resumes and parental consent forms before we could go any further. I had them with me, actually, so that wasn't a problem. But... when I handed them over..."

Senri already realized what he was going to say. Nodding her head solemnly, she let out a soft, "Oh..." Hinae, too, had come to the same realization.

"That's when, completely out of nowhere, she goes, 'Oh no, I forgot I had to make a phone call,' and took out her phone. She then hurriedly told us to go home and that she would call us later to tell us if we got hired or not."

"I'm assuming she never called you?" Senri asked sadly.

Keisuke nodded. "Yeah, well, we already knew that once she found out we went to Hekiho things were gonna go south, so it's not like we were particularly surprised... My mom, though—she's a completely different story. She immediately called the store after I told her and started laying into them, demanding to know what happened, why we were ghosted—all that stuff. And now, here we are."

"Whoa. Go mom," Hinae said.

Senri, meanwhile, had a much more sour look on her face. "She sounds like a good mother..." she said.

"It makes sense. She's a single mom with one kid. He's all she's got, really," Masuda chimed in.

Yeah... Makes sense, Hinae thought. She was not in a state in which she could take any particular interest in other people's family situations, but she still found it interesting for a few older teenage boys to talk about their moms in such a manner. She found herself wondering if perhaps her situation might've been different had she been raised by a single mother instead.

"Yo, Empress? Is this the kinda thing that'd be better to talk to the committee about? Rather than just over food or whatever," Masuda asked.

Fulfilling a routine that had long since grown tired, Senri began by saying, "Stop calling me Empress," then followed with her actual response. "It's hard to say. Obviously it would make for a very strong story—especially since, as far as I know, there are no kids at Hekiho who are currently waiting for interviews. The problem is, if we brought it up with the committee, it might... hm..."

Seeing Senri fall deep in thought, Hinae also began to envision various scenarios of what could happen next should they proceed; it did not take long for her to understand Senri's hesitancy. "You're kind of in a tough spot there," she

said. “If someone got hired on and *then* got canned for no legit reason, then we’d definitely have something... but that’s not the case here.”

“Unfortunately, I’m afraid I’ve come to the same conclusion. I can’t say I know the particulars if we had to get into the weeds of it, but I don’t believe we have a case if your hiring was based only on a verbal agreement.”

Noticing the solemn expressions on the girls’ faces, Keisuke frantically waved his hands back and forth in front of him. “Hey, hey! It’s fine! I didn’t really get my hopes up or anything—I wasn’t even planning to do anything at all. I was just... y’know...” Keisuke’s face fell. “Ugh, why is it like this...?”

Drowning out the boy’s fading murmurs, the voices of the couple seated nearby grew louder once more; they were laughing, likely having finished their more serious conversation involving their futures.

Why is it like this...? Keisuke’s murmur repeated in her head. Then, in an effort not to merely dispel the grave tone that had been set, but to resolve it, she raised her drink in the air.

“How about a toast?”

The other three students looked at Hinae, confused.

“What, you guys never done one of those before?” Hinae teased. “Here’s to us asking the age-old question: ‘Why the hell is it like this?’” Ignoring the group’s hesitancy, she tapped her glass against theirs with a *clink*.

“To us!”

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The four students departed the restaurant soon after the toast, visited a karaoke spot, then decided to call it a day. Hinae had been completely neutral to that decision, but Senri had still been a slight bit sour. *“I suppose it’s a more than reasonable place to go on a date like this... but still...”* she had said. It would seem that the five and a half hours that Hinae had imprisoned her in the karaoke bar a few days prior still lingered in her mind.

After parting with the boys, Senri asked Hinae a question. “I’ve been wondering... What exactly did you say to Ishiwata to get him to agree to a date? Didn’t you turn him down?”

Her face one of slight embarrassment, Hinae answered, “I maybe, sort of, told him that I would think about it again... And that I needed some time. So it’s not like I was like, ‘I changed my mind! Take me, Ishiwata!’ or whatever, it was just... you know, a date, but like... not a date...?”

“Hm. Well, he seems like a nice boy. Fairly attractive, too.”

“You think so? Well, *I’d* say Masuda’s got some promise. Guy definitely has energy.”

As she spoke, Hinae inspected the fairly nuanced expression on Senri’s face; she

couldn't quite explain what exactly it was supposed to convey, and yet, somehow, she also understood exactly how she was feeling. She couldn't help but laugh. "Bleeegh. I actually hate what we're doing right now—this bachelorette-style date thing where we're '*evaluating our potential suitors*' or whatever. Makes me feel gross—and that if the guys knew, they wouldn't want us even if we did pick them."

"Fair enough. We don't have to treat it like how other people would," Senri said. "I'm curious, though... Have you been put in a situation like that before?"

"Uh, do you even have to ask? Of course I haven't—it sounds totally miserable."

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Perhaps due to the day having been far more involved than she had expected, Hinae found herself feeling particularly tired upon returning home; as a result, the second after she came in the door, she went straight to her room without so much as a word to her uncle and aunt.

Lying atop her bed, she thought about the day's date. However, what came to mind was not the boys she had spent that date with, but several other things instead. The scene in the elevator at the grocery store. The couple who had been at the restaurant. The interview Keisuke had told her about.

Hinae had a hard time understanding her thoughts completely, but what she did know was that Keisuke's words may very well have given a voice to the exact feelings she'd always had in regards to her situation.

"Ugh, why is it like this...?"

Suddenly, the worksheet popped into her head. It was the first day of the school week tomorrow—in other words, it was due in less than 24 hours.

"Why is it like this..." Hinae murmured. "Why is it like this..." She then forced her tired body to get up from her bed and headed over to her desk.

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The next day, SBSAC found themselves even busier than ever. The end-of-year assembly, the place where they would present all their work, was coming up the next weekend; because of this, it was decided that they absolutely *had to* get all the responses logged in the spreadsheet by the end of the week, lest they run out of time. To meet this end, Hinae and Senri continued their logging work at a much faster pace; Mizuki and Machi fully took a break from Tennis Club in order to focus on interviews; and Hana started drafting the presentation, all while preparing to submit it to the school for approval. Everything else was put on the backburner.

As she chipped away at the draft on a laptop she'd brought, Hana turned to her classmate. "Sorry to bother you, Senri, but... I have a question," she said. "I have a rough draft of sorts ready, but... but..."

“But what?” Senri asked.

“Mmm... I was just thinking that maybe it would be better if the speech had a couple extra sections—like, one for the president, and one for someone else... That way, it’d be easier to tell that it was a group effort on our part. Also, I’m sure everyone would rather hear a bunch of this from someone in the student council, not me...”

“Hana...” Senri immediately stopped typing on the spreadsheet and gaped at Hana. “You want me to do all that?”

“A-Actually, never mind. S-Sorry, it was a stupid idea. Forget it.”

“No, no! I wasn’t upset—it’s a *great* idea, Hana. And not only am I impressed with you for coming up with it, but I fully believe that it’s the best decision moving forward.”

Immediately after finishing her sentence, Senri got up and went to leave the committee room, and despite Hana’s cries of, “Wait, I don’t mean you have to do it right *now*!” she didn’t turn back even once.

Hinae also found herself particularly impressed with her classmate. Without realizing it, her eyes had been locked on to her ever since she had started speaking.

“Okay, am I crazy, or have you changed, Hana?” she said.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s just... how do I put this... I dunno, you just have.”

Hana scoffed in a *“What’s that supposed to mean?”* sort of way, then got up from her seat in a hurry. “I’m already going after Senri, so I’ll just get all the new submissions from Mizuki and Machi while I’m at it. They’re probably swamped with them... maybe.”

Hinae still hadn’t stopped staring at Hana. She certainly wasn’t intending to communicate anything to her, yet, all the same, her eyes told Hana something—something she felt she needed to respond to. “Mmm, I don’t think I’ve changed. It’s like you said before, Hina. ‘The more you treasure something, the more willing you must be to part with it—lest your imparted value begin to damage the very treasure you hold so dear...’ Did I say that right?”

“Wait, what...? Oh! Y-Yeah, you got it,” Hinae stammered, nodding overenthusiastically; she had been taken off guard—it was fairly difficult for her to remember what exactly she had said, considering how she had come up with that quote on the spot nearly a month ago. If she recalled correctly, she had said it at the theater when Hana was worrying about Mizuki.

“I really like that quote, maybe... and I like thinking about things that way, so... yeah.” Blushing ever so slightly, with those words, Hana left the room.

Having been left entirely alone in the committee room, Hinae sat still as her friend’s answer reverberated in her mind. Her hands could no longer move—she couldn’t even bring herself to touch the keyboard anymore, leaving her work at a

standstill. She was filled with unease and uncertainty, as if lost in a grand labyrinth of her own mind.

Eventually, she took the worksheet out from her bag and muttered to herself...

"Damn. Well said, me."

The paper Hinae submitted was completely blank.

In the end, she had not been able to write anything. She had managed to escape the consequences of this by lying to her homeroom teacher, saying that she was too busy with the committee—but while that *was* true, it was far from the real reason she had not been able to complete it.

Senri, meanwhile, had submitted hers just fine, stating firmly and succinctly that she wanted to become a nurse. As for Hana, she answered that she wanted to go on to attend a scientific university; she had yet to decide on a particular career she wished to pursue, but, at the very least, she knew that whatever she wanted to do, she would need higher education to do it.

Everyone had a path.

Everyone... except me, Hinae thought to herself. *And that's the story of how everyone left me behind...*

Before the time had come for her to work on the assignment, Hinae had been under the impression that she would've just said she was going to college, and that she had a specific university that suited her academic ability in mind. But the reason for this was not because it matched her actual intentions for her future. Perhaps the only reason she would've answered as such was simply because she wouldn't have placed so much importance on the assignment. It was just a piece of paper, after all. Even if she had written that she was going to pursue higher education, it did not mean that she actually had to follow through with that plan. It could change and morph into any number of possibilities later on. But now, she couldn't bring herself to think that way.

She couldn't let herself treat it that way.

Hinae allowed her mind to drift back to the many novels she had read over the years. There must have been a whole army of characters who had gone through the same struggles as she was now. What decisions had they made in the end? What thoughts had been racing through their minds as they came to said decisions?

And... what was going through his *head?*

Suddenly, Hinae's thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of her cell phone. Glancing at the display, the name displayed on her phone made her eyes go wide. She quickly answered it.

In an attempt to pull herself out of her brooding, Hinae strove to make her voice sound as cheerful as possible. "Ciao, Ishiwata! What's poppin'?"

“Hey. Sorry to call you out of the blue like this, but I need to talk to you about something.”

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Upon arriving at AH Tokyo General Hospital in Yoyogi, she found Keisuke waiting for her in the lobby.

With an apologetic look on his face, he said, “Ugh, I’m sorry about all this. I really didn’t want to have you deal with this, but I just—”

“It’s fine, dude. Like, yeah, it sucks, but I’m still glad you called me,” Hinae replied.

For her, as well as all other CCS patients, this was a hospital they had become very familiar with; it was dedicated to researching and treating the syndrome, after all. Even now, many patients were still hospitalized there—especially those who had yet to recover mentally. Hinae herself had slept in one of the beds there hardly less than six months ago.

It had happened only a couple days ago, Keisuke explained to Hinae. He had been scheduled for a mandatory check-up, and his mom, who always took him to his appointments, went with him. However, upon arriving for his periodic visit, a few reporters—likely from a weekly magazine of some sort—were there waiting for him. This in and of itself was not unusual, and as such, Keisuke simply ignored the reporters and went on to complete the checkup like it was any other appointment. But when he left the examination room, he was shocked to find his mother was being interviewed.

As she answered the barrage of questions thrown her way, she told the reporters that a group of parents had been formed to help address the various issues faced by CCS patients—specifically, a group composed of parents of children who were in recovery from the syndrome. She also mentioned SBSAC by name, explaining it was student-led and that, together with the group of parents, they would be working together to address disparities—potential or otherwise. The reporters really latched on to the committee once it was mentioned, and Keisuke’s mother latched on to that interest in turn. She told them that if they wanted to know more about the committee, an interview with the students who ran it could be arranged if they contacted the school; this would also allow the committee to educate the public directly about the present state of the syndrome to the world at large.

Keisuke had frantically tried to stop his mother from saying anything more, but she’d refused to listen to him. Instead, she told him that opportunities such as this would not come along very often, leaving him with no choice but to reach out to Hinae—who was, of course, a member of the committee.

“What’d the school end up saying?” Keisuke asked.

Hinae frowned. “They told us to be really careful with what we say from this point onward. And I mean, what are we even *supposed* to say? The committee hasn’t even *existed* for a month yet. And that’s what I’ll tell the reporters—who

I'm assuming are upstairs along with your mom?"

"Yeah. They're right before the psych ward on the fifth floor. Y'know, that super claustrophobic lobby where they make us wait in before our checkups?"

"Bleeegh..." Hinae groaned exaggeratedly. The media would have had to jump through a lot of hoops just to get into the hospital, so, in spite of her frustrations, Hinae actually found herself somewhat impressed with them for going that far.

After a short, courteous nod to the nurse at the reception desk—a woman who had become an all-too-familiar face to them—Hinae and Keisuke headed up the stairs toward the fifth floor. The path had become second nature to them, having taken it time and time again during rehab.

"Seriously, I'm really, really sorry for dragging you into this," Keisuke said once again.

"Dude, I said it's fine. Stop apologizing already," Hinae replied. "Besides, if your mom had called the school directly, this would suck *way* more. Like, we're talking a hundred reporters swarming the school or something. The whole committee would be totally screwed. This? This only sucks a *little* bit."

After arriving at the top of the staircase, the two came to a lobby with a small number of softly colored benches. Standing in the corner of the room was a woman in a suit and a couple of older men talking to each other.

"Those two guys are from the magazine?" Hinae asked with her eyes, and Keisuke nodded.

As she approached the three people, Hinae was hit with a wave of surprise; she had imagined Keisuke's mother to be the picture-perfect example of a nagging, helicopter parent, but she was just the opposite. She was beautiful, with long hair that gently reached down to her shoulders and a slender figure pulled straight from a fashion magazine. Her demeanor was a very warm, friendly one—something her soft hairstyle made all the more apparent. As she was Keisuke's mother, she had to have been at least 40 years old, but you never could have known from how she looked; Hinae would have guessed she was in her early thirties.

"Hey, Mom. I brought her," Keisuke said. The moment she heard him, Keisuke's mother turned around, and her eyes shot straight to Hinae. Her beauty was no different from the front; for a moment, Hinae found herself at a loss for words, but she quickly told herself that she had to make a good first impression and forced herself to say the first word.

Hinae bowed her head. "Hello. My name is Arimura Hinae, and I'm a friend of your son's," she said. "I'm a member of the Students for the Betterment of Student Autonomy and Conditions Committee at Hekiho Academy. And, I... uh... I'm here to..." She hesitated for a few moments, wondering where exactly to begin. But before she could finally find her words, Keisuke's mother suddenly reached her arms around Hinae and pulled her toward her; she was practically hugging her now.

“See here, boys? Look at how adorable she is! You can’t even tell she had that dreadful disease, now can you? And look—it’s not contagious at all!” she said, practically hugging Hinae. She then joined Hinae’s hands with hers, tightly grasping them as if her life depended on it, before holding them up to show the two reporters. “See? I’m perfectly fine!”

“Mom!” Keisuke yelled angrily, and his mother quickly let go. Hinae was taken aback; not knowing how exactly she was supposed to react, she simply smiled, trying as best she could to not let show the intense emotions that were bubbling up inside her.

This type of social interaction was particularly difficult for Hinae to gauge; in that moment, she found herself thinking that, if she still had her powers, her first instinct would have been to use them to tell whether Keisuke’s mother was lying or not. Then, based on the answer, she would have acted accordingly in order to please his mother as best she could. She did not dare let the fact that her smile was forced show, and yet, Keisuke’s mother’s expression ever so slightly stiffened.

Electing to ignore the woman’s change in demeanor, Hinae then began to speak once more, and this time, she placed particular emphasis on her professional tone. “We have just received confirmation from the school regarding the matter of the potential interview that was being discussed: I’m afraid the school—or rather, the committee has nothing to share with the public as of this time. My apologies.”

The two reporters looked skeptical, but before they could say anything, Keisuke’s mother spoke up. “I’m sorry? What do you mean you have nothing to share?”

“I mean exactly what I said, ma’am. The committee is still in the process of gathering anecdotes and other forms of responses from the student body, and as such, we have yet to compile them into a functional report that can be presented. The committee itself has only existed for a short time, after all, so having such a thing ready would be understandably unrealistic.”

“Okay... What kind of anecdotes, then? You can at least tell us that much.”

“We are still in the process of gathering them, so I’m afraid I cannot say.”

Immediately following this statement, one of the reporters interjected with an, “If I may?” before boorishly shoving the tape recorder he had in his hand toward Hinae. “We received word that the committee was founded entirely by students. Is that true?”

“That is correct,” Hinae answered succinctly.

“And are you the one heading this committee?”

“No, I’m just a member. My apologies, but the school has asked me to keep my statement as short as possible, so if you wish to ask further questions, please contact them directly. Thank you.”

The duo of reporters persisted, continuing to fire off questions while jabbing their recorders at her, but Hinae simply kept repeating the same, “No further questions.”

This was not the first time Hinae had been interviewed in this way, and as such, she was very adept at handling them; she knew not to give the press what they wanted, be it anecdotes, testimony, or even something as abstract as what emotions she was feeling.

“Excuse me, young lady,” Keisuke’s mother said. “Even if you don’t have any answers to give, are you sure there’s nothing you’d like to ask these two gentlemen from the press while you have them?”

It wasn’t that she wished to tie off any loose ends—no, Keisuke’s mother was simply unhappy with Hinae’s attitude and response to the situation. Very unhappy. And it could be felt in her every word.

Hinae answered in an instant. “No.”

“I was under the impression you were part of a committee dedicated to *solving* the societal issues with CCS? While I know full well how important it is to listen to personal anecdotes and opinions, those aren’t the only things you should be focusing on. These gentlemen are here because it’s their job—you won’t be troubling them no matter what you tell them. You have an opportunity here, so you’d be wise to make use of it. Okay, dear?” Keisuke’s mother smiled, and the two men followed suit, nodding enthusiastically.

“We, the parents, have finally started to take action,” Keisuke’s mother continued. “We have been taking all sorts of measures, with one such measure being working with the hospital in order to hold regular seminars that promote understanding of all the many facets of CCS. We just held a proposal for that very idea not too long ago, in fact—why do you think the reporters are here? *Therefore*, it would be *incredibly helpful* if we could work together—us, and your inspiring committee.”

This was the first Hinae had heard of such an idea.

“Apologies, but I really must be going. Maybe next time,” she said.

“Ms. Arimura, was it? You should really be considering the school’s current opinion of you before you make this decision. This is a *very good* opportunity, and I suggest you don’t be stupid and squand—”

“Mom, that’s enough.” Unable to take it anymore, Keisuke cut off his mother and grabbed Arimura by the arm. “We’re leaving.”

Without saying another word, Hinae complied and headed for the stairs along with Keisuke. Before they could manage to leave, however, one of the reporters came up and offered something to her: a business card. Not wanting to be rude, Hinae took it—and the man immediately took this as his cue to speak. “Are you sure you’re okay with letting it end like this? You should listen to his mom—you gotta be on top of these things. Don’t let it slip through your fingers, kid,” he said.

Hinae was paralyzed. His words were horribly patronizing.

Realizing the girl could not respond, the man spoke once more. “Well, if you change your mind, you know who to call.” He then turned back around.

“Arimura?”

Keisuke’s voice felt like it was a million miles away.

The question from before rang loudly inside Arimura’s mind.

“Are you sure you’re okay with letting it end like this?”

Was she? Was she okay with letting it end like this...?

Of course she wasn’t.

Her teeth sinking into her lip, Hinae departed the psych ward and headed down the stairs.

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Upon arriving back in Shibuya, the sun had already set. Hinae had planned to return to Hekiho in order to continue working on committee matters, but Keisuke insisted on buying her something in order to apologize for everything. Deciding she couldn’t pass that up, she selected a nearby convenience store, where she opted for a red bean bun and a cup of hot tea; the two students then started walking to Miyashita Park—a place very close to Hinae’s heart. A place where they could finally rest easy.

“Are you sure that was the smart thing to do?” Keisuke asked as they walked.

“Quiet. Don’t disrespect the bun. This is *our* time,” Hinae said, sinking her teeth into the sweet bread.

Upon arriving, the two sat down side by side on the park bench. The bright lights cast away the night sky; homeless people lined the pavement; and, likely recognizing how needed they would be during the cold, a group of volunteers were preparing to open the soup kitchen for the day near the back of the park.

Noticing how uncomfortable Keisuke looked, Hinae decided to cut the tension. “Okay, so, am I crazy, or is your mom *really* hot?”

“Uh... she doesn’t... look bad, I guess,” Keisuke responded in a slightly perturbed tone. He then let out a sigh. “And she knows it. She’s got enough self confidence to make anyone jealous. Hell, she used to be a model—she’s a manager at some entertainment agency now, though.”

“Yeah, I can definitely tell she’s got confidence to spare,” Hinae said with a nod. She had noticed that, when Keisuke’s mother had been talking to the two reporters, there had been a time where she had absolutely been weaponizing her appearance. Perhaps the reason why she was empathizing with her own child as if the two of them were friends—or siblings, even—was because she herself looked and felt so young. Perhaps that very same reason explained why Keisuke was willing to talk about her in such a matter-of-fact manner.

“Well, judging from what I got from her, I’m gonna take a shot in the dark and say she’s not done calling that job you guys were aiming for,” Hinae smirked.

“Yeah... She’s just always been like this. She always acts like everything she

says or does is the right thing—and most of the time, it is! I hate it!" Keisuke paused for a moment. "I just... I just can't help but think..."

Keisuke's words trailed off—but Hinae was able to understand the sentiment he wished to share even without them.

"'Why is it like this?'" she said.

She had parroted his words back to him, and when he realized that, he laughed. "True that," he remarked with a smile, then took a large gulp of his drink. Hinae returned his smile, and in that moment, for the very first time, Hinae found herself taking a bit of a liking to the boy. Gazing at his face, she realized that Senri was right—he was indeed fairly attractive; perhaps that, too, could be attributed to his mother.

Suddenly, the two's eyes met.

In an attempt to quickly escape the moment, Hinae rushed to say, "Oh yeah, uh... Ishiwata, have you turned in that '*future prospects*' worksheet or whatever?"

"Oh, the one from homeroom? Yeah, but I didn't put that much thought into it. I just said I was gonna get a job and left it at that."

"Wait, really? You're not going to college?"

Hinae was surprised. The vast majority of students in both her and Senri's years had answered by saying they would be pursuing higher education, and, if she recalled correctly, those who didn't were all self-employed and/or helping with their family businesses. This, obviously, was not the case with Keisuke.

"Nah. I'd rather find something I can hold down right now," Keisuke answered. "What about you?"

"I haven't exactly finished it yet. I've really gotta get on it..."

"What, are you still on the fence about what you'd choose?"

"I..." Hinae hesitated, before deciding to answer honestly. "Yeah. I guess I am."

"You're not alone."

"Huh?"

Keisuke shrugged. "Yeah. I might've *said* on the sheet that I'm gonna get a job, but... I'm just gonna come out and say it: my *mom* might as well have said that, not me. As for what I think? I dunno—it's not like I have anything I wanna study. All I know is that I'm sick of being a burden on my mom. So I'm more than happy with just getting a job."

In that moment, Hinae recalled something that Masuda had told her: Keisuke was the only child of a single mother. An only child who had eventually come down with CCS. Of course, Hinae had no way of knowing whether or not his mother thought he was a burden—but what she did know was it was no small feat to raise a son on your own, let alone one with CCS.

"She never went to college herself, either—she's told me as long as I can

remember that just having a part-time job would be infinitely more useful than just getting a credit or two at a college or vocational school or whatever. Hell, the whole trying to get a job at the convenience store thing was her idea," Keisuke explained.

"Huh..." Hinae said.

"So yeah, I don't really mind where I'm at. But enough about me—Arimura, do you have anything you wanna go on to study? Got a major in mind?"

Hinae couldn't come up with an answer immediately. She knew she liked books, so going into the publishing industry could be interesting—perhaps as an editor or publisher. But this was the first time she had ever given thought to such a thing. Never before had she considered what exactly she wished to study professionally and where that course would take her.

If she were to submit the worksheet with the answer of "pursuing higher education," she would have to write down a target university and major. The most honest answer she could give with that option was that she would likely choose a literature major; if she were to seek out a job instead, it would likely be with a publishing company. However, she also understood the pool of firms that would accept a fresh high school graduate would be very limited. She also wondered if a diploma from Hekiho would even be accepted as a proper high school diploma.

"There's way too much to think about..." she murmured to herself aimlessly. She then stood up from the bench; if she did not return home soon, her chances of completing her assigned amount of data to organize that day would be slim. Keisuke did not pursue the matter further.

As the two approached the park's exit, Hinae stopped. The place where she stood had also served as the entrance to a parking spot in the past—or so she'd heard. But now, it was as barren as could be.

Hinae was deathly silent. In that parking spot, a single RV had once sat. The police had seized it recently, and now, nothing remained. There weren't even any cones or tape to cordon off the area; and yet, despite the many homeless that sought nothing more than a place to stay, not one had stepped beyond that line to take up the empty space.

"...*imura*... Arimura?"

Hinae snapped back to her senses with a start. "Huh? What'd you say?" she said.

"I asked you what your thoughts were."

"Huh? My thoughts on what?"

Keisuke must have been asking her opinion on something, but she had missed it entirely. She hurriedly waved her hand back and forth in an attempt to smooth over her mistake. "Sorry, I spaced out there for a second. You mind asking again?"

“No, it’s nothing... Don’t worry about it,” Keisuke murmured. “Sorry I ruined your day. See you at school.” Having given up on whatever he had been meaning to ask, he then walked off into the night.

Hinae made to turn around to head back to Hekiho, only to stop once more. There was a single empty can lying in the middle of the empty parking space. Hinae reached down to pick it up, but as she did, something fell out of her pocket. It was the business card she had been given earlier.

Was she truly okay with letting it end as it had?

Hinae sighed to herself, then threw the empty can she had picked up into a nearby trash can. That was when she spotted a homeless man passing by—one she happened to know. She called out to him.

His name was Gen. He was a very spirited man, with a layered past that found itself changing every time he told it. After a light round of small talk, Hinae asked to borrow his lighter. He then led her over to the smoking section of the park. Hinae then took the business card, lit it aflame, and dropped it in an ashtray.

The flame set her eyes aglow as she let it burn to nothing.

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By the time she had returned to school and explained the events of the hospital to Senri and Hana, Hinae had already forgotten the name of the reporter on the business card. The rest of her week after their chat had consisted of very little other than compiling data; only on Sunday following the rest of the committee members’ arrival did she remember the events of the hospital, and only then did she check with the school to see if the reporters had contacted them. Surprisingly enough, though, they had not.

That was, until the beginning of next week.

As she was preparing her speech for the end-of-year assembly that would finally arrive that weekend, the school received a phone call.

“A magazine publisher will be coming to Hekiho to cover the committee’s presentation at the assembly,” Hinae’s homeroom teacher informed her. The two were located in the teacher’s lounge after school one day; Hinae was there to tell him that she couldn’t complete the worksheet and ask that he please wait until the assembly—the very last moment she could turn it in.

Gazing at her reflection in the windowpane, she frowned at the news.

“The parent of that second-year contacted them directly. The writers at the magazine were so enthralled, they said they’d do a full-page feature on it,” the teacher continued.

“Sorry, who are you talking about? What parent?” Hinae asked, a bad feeling rising in her stomach.

“You can probably guess. It was the mom you ran into at the hospital last week.”

And the bad feeling in her chest had been swiftly confirmed. Unable to hide her true feelings on the matter, Hinae's frown deepened. Seeing this, the teacher smiled a smile that seemed to say, *"I know how you feel,"* and proceeded to grab a stack of papers from beneath his desk.

"She certainly had energy to spare. Would hate to be on her bad side at a PTA meeting," he joked. "Anyway, you see this stack of papers here? This is a proposal she drummed up for both the school and the committee. They just put it on my desk."

"You're kidding."

"Now, I know how you feel—'Ugh, she needs to mind her own business'—but trust me: there's nothing wrong with accepting a little help from the parents every now and then. Just flip through it—it's a good proposal. *Really* good. The school's definitely on board. All that's left is you to tell us if we're gonna move forward with it."

"When you say the school, who do you mean, exactly? The principal?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, you got it. He's definitely pushing hard for it."

Hinae found herself somewhat surprised at how quickly it had been approved; if Keisuke's mother had only just brought the papers, how had both the principal and her homeroom teacher deliberated on it in order to come to that conclusion? Perhaps it was because they were both men.

"Let me see that," Hinae said.

"Sure. Actually, you can have this one—it's a copy for you and the committee," her teacher responded.

Hinae gazed down at the stack of papers; proposal after proposal, suggestion after detailed suggestion lined each and every page. Eventually, at some point as she skimmed through it all, her eyes landed upon a particular section that was in a much larger font than the rest. It was two suggestions for the committee.

"We propose that our group shall hold regular seminars in coordination with the hospital in order to convey the truth, tragedy, and reality behind the syndrome."

"We propose that we create media that shall counter disinformation about the syndrome, while disseminating the actual facts that would be obtained by partnering with proper medical professionals. The goal of this venture would be to eventually create an organization that would be operated and managed entirely by ex-CCS patients."

"Hm," Hinae murmured to herself, before thinking the same thing in her head. *Hm.*

The school supported these proposals.

They were willing to move forward with them.

Hm.

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"You're awfully late."

Upon arriving back at the committee room, Hinae was immediately met with Senri's rebuking. Looking over, Hinae saw her typing away at the keyboard; she was working on their presentation for the assembly. She, Hana, and the three first-years had already decided on the specific anecdotes and other findings they wished to present—all they had to do now was reach out to the specific persons who had submitted them. From there, they would confirm whether or not the persons consented to having their stories shared, as well as if the nuances the committee wished to convey through their stories matched with the actual opinions of the submitters.

"Sorry. I just can't seem to do this stupid thing," Hinae said. Plopping down in a nearby chair, Hinae threw the worksheet down on the desk in front of her. The only thing written on it was her name; everything that actually mattered was completely blank.

Senri gazed over at the blank page and gave Hinae a soft nod; the answer she had given had been more than enough for her to understand. "I see. Well, at this point, I'm afraid I don't care about what anyone else says—you need to use all the time you have left to decide, even if it comes down to the very wire. If they're pushing and prodding you, remember: your teacher said you had up until the very assembly itself. So I suggest you *use* that time," she said.

Heh. The Empress strikes again. Her friend's words were curt, yet reassuring—something Hinae was very grateful for.

Feeling a little bit better now, Hinae moved onto the next topic. "Guess what I got?" she said, broaching the subject with a fairly lighthearted tone.

"What?" Senri responded.

"Let's just say: Ishiwata's mom is *wild*."

Hinae then told Senri everything about what had just happened in the teacher's lounge, then handed her the copy of the proposal.

"We propose that our group shall hold regular seminars in coordination with the hospital in order to convey the truth, tragedy, and reality behind the syndrome."

"We propose that we create media that shall counter disinformation about the syndrome, while disseminating the actual facts that would be obtained by partnering with proper medical professionals. The goal of this venture would be to eventually create an organization that would be operated and managed entirely by ex-CCS patients."

Upon finishing her brief reading through of the proposals, Senri gave a familiar murmur. "Hm."

Hinae chuckled to herself. She wondered if she herself had had the same look on her face as she read it.

“So? Whaddaya think?” she said.

“I don’t really know *what* to think... Give me a moment to figure that out,” Senri said. As she read through the document one more time, Senri slowly formed her opinion in her head; complicated as it was, she proceeded to share her honest feelings on the matter to Hinae, and Hinae alone.

Hinae nodded. “I one hundred percent agree,” she said.

“I see. How shall we proceed, then? It’s not like we can just ignore a proposal of this magnitude...” As she spoke, Senri highlighted the contents of her manuscript and deleted them in their entirety. She was going to completely rewrite it. “Though I have to say... I definitely am no longer surprised that she reached out to that convenience store.”

“Right? I literally told Ishiwata that exact thing.”

“Speaking of Ishiwata... What’s going on there?”

Hinae did not expect to be asked that. The truth was, nothing was going on. Ever since the two had left Miyashita Park that day, the most they would do was say “hello” when they passed each other in the halls. She had asked him to give her some more time to think about how she would respond to his confession, but the honest truth was that she didn’t have the time, nor the mental capacity to even think about it.

As she conveyed these sentiments to Senri, Senri continued to relentlessly tap away at the keyboard; without even stopping, she then responded with, “I suppose that’s fair. You do have an awful lot on your plate.”

“What about you? What’s going on with you and what’s his face? Ugh, what was his name again... Oh! Masuda?”

“Same as you. A whole lot of nothing.”

“Oh, really? Hm, and here I thought the two of you’d had lunch together a couple days back.”

Senri’s hands stopped dead in their tracks. “How do you know about that?”

“Oh, I just passed Masuda in the halls on my way to class the other day, and he told me the darndest thing... He said he and the Empress were going to eat lunch together! Imagine my surprise—the *Empress* eating with a *commoner*? Inconceivable! My heart just about stopped!”

“My word... I really do wonder what goes through that boy’s head sometimes... if anything at all...” Senri said with an exasperated sigh—an emotion that Hinae understood somewhat. “Even still, that doesn’t mean there’s anything going on between us. All it is is—”

Suddenly, Senri’s words were cut short by a knock at the door. “Come in!” Hinae shouted in its direction. The door then opened, and a single woman stepped inside.

“Excuse me. Is this the room for the CCS committee?”

Seeing the woman who had entered the committee room, Hinae shot up in her seat. It was Keisuke's mother. She was wearing the same suit that she had been wearing the other day, and she was holding a purse in her hand that looked fairly expensive.

The moment their eyes met, Ms. Ishiwata smiled. "Oh, I'm just here to visit the teachers and the principal. They were kind enough to show me around the school, and since we were passing by, I figured I'd bring by a few goodies for you all," she said.

"O-Oh, uh... Thank you," Hinae stammered before accepting the bag from her; as Senri did not know the woman, Hinae was serving as the mediator in the situation.

"Would you like some coffee?" Senri offered.

Ms. Ishiwata waved her hand to dismiss the offer. "Thank you, but I'm fine. I just wanted to drop these off, nothing more. I'm sure you two must be very busy." However, in spite of her words, her eyes drifted about the room, inspecting its size and scale—before eventually falling on Hinae's desk where the proposal sat. "Oh, they already gave it to you. Wonderful. Have you read through it already by chance?"

Hinae nodded.

"Well? What do you think?"

"We, uh..." Hinae stammered.

Senri quickly stepped in and answered for her. "The suggestions certainly have potential," she said.

"Y-Yeah. That's what the people in charge said," Hinae cut back in.

The moment she heard that, the woman's face fell. "By that, you mean... you don't agree with them?"

Hinae's words caught in her throat; at a loss for what to say next, her eyes shot to Senri, pleading for help. Immediately understanding the cue, Senri spoke up to cover for her. "Well, it's hard to say at this point; we have yet to examine the proposals as intimately as they deserve. We were hoping to give you a proper answer as a committee after running it by the rest of the team. You can look forward to our presentation at the assembly—I'm sure we'll have an answer for you by then," Senri then paused for a moment. "Before you go, however—may I ask you something?"

"What?" Ms. Ishiwata said irritably. It was clear that she did not care for the pleasantries and wished that Senri would just spit it out already. Senri seemed to have picked up on this, but instead of changing her demeanor, she continued as normal without daring to make eye contact with the woman.

"This proposal about giving seminars in collaboration with the hospital... It says that we would also be asking for the cooperation of the CCS patients who are still present in said hospital. Is this something they themselves offered as an option?

Or did you step in and propose this for them without their consent?"

"Of course I got their consent," she said indignantly. "Though I suppose I did not ask *every* child in the hospital—but I know those who belong to parents in our group are more than willing to participate!"

"I'm sorry, what?!" Hinae shouted. Her voice had come out far louder than she had meant it to, startling both Senri and Ms. Ishiwata. But it didn't take long for the woman's surprise to turn to frustrated puzzlement.

"What's gotten into you, Ms. Arimura?"

"I, uh... I..." Hinae stammered, before steeling herself. "I don't think you're being fair to the patients. They're not in a good mental state to begin with, let alone one where they can do all you're trying to ask of them. Why do you think they're still hospitalized in the first place?"

"I understand how you feel..." Ms. Ishiwata said, and Hinae and Senri both immediately twitched. But she did not seem to notice. "However, those children must face what they're struggling with and overcome it. Besides, their parents will obviously be with them at every moment. The only reason Keisuke—my son—was released from the hospital was because he overcame the syndrome. I'm sure you two are just the same."

Hinae's look turned to a sharp glare. Trying as best she could to not raise her voice, she responded. "We, *including* your son, *already* feel immense guilt over our disease. We already feel like we're a massive burden on everyone around us. This? This will *not* help." she began. "Now, you say you have their consent. Did each and every set of parents go up to their kids—their *sick kids*—and ask them if they would be willing to help?"

"Yes...?"

"Okay, sure, they may have agreed on paper. But have you considered the fact that what you're asking is taking advantage of that *very guilt* I just mentioned? We feel we have a responsibility to make up for the trouble we cause everyone else, and we're all already so lost because of how little we understand about the disease. Our parents—our *sole guardians*—are all we have. Do you really think someone could say no to their own parents and guardians under those circumstances?"

Ms. Ishiwata had grown very clearly upset; her lips twisted into a strained smile as she glared at Hinae. But Hinae refused to avert her eyes.

The two continued to stare each other down, but eventually, Ms. Ishiwata was the one to break. Her hand reached up to her neck and rubbed it back and forth, as if lamenting her uncomfortable situation. "Forget it. You'll understand soon enough," she spat, before turning to leave. But before she could exit the room, she stopped.

"Oh dear. Ms. Arimura?" she said after a moment of silence. "Have you *still* not decided on your future yet?"

Her gaze was pointed down at one of the desks—a desk that was decorated

with a single piece of paper. The worksheet with nothing but Hinae's name on it.

All that came to Hinae's mind was a single, instinctive thought: *Oh no...*

"I have no intention of arguing with you. All I ask is for you to understand how we, the parents, feel."

Hinae did not respond; there was obviously no way she could understand how a parent would feel in this situation.

"We were all so distraught when our children suddenly turned into these... things. And we couldn't look to anyone around us for help—what were they going to do? You have *no idea* how much we've suffered. Why else do you think we want to address these issues so badly? To *solve* them once and for all?" Ms. Ishiwata then paused. "But I suppose a child who can't even decide on their own future would have a hard time seeing what's right in front of them."

And upon spitting out those words, she immediately left the room.

Silence.

It was as if the entire building had collapsed around them, and all that remained was still, deafeningly quiet rubble. The chair creaked louder and louder under Hinae's weight, barely able to keep itself standing as she leaned back in it.

"Would you like some coffee?" Senri offered, breaking the silence.

After a few moments, Hinae answered. "Yeah, sure. Merci." Hinae then took the cup, dumped a large amount of sugar into the dark liquid, then drank it down in one gulp. She was feeling completely numb.

"Are you all right?" Senri asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?" she responded.

"Why *would* you be?" Senri said with a dry chuckle.

Hearing those words, Hinae was finally, albeit slowly, able to relax; she then poured herself a glass of hot water. This time, however, she sipped from it slowly, allowing the warm liquid to wash away the feelings lying deep inside her.

"Well... she's not wrong. I have no idea what to do with my life," Hinae said, picking up the worksheet off her desk by its corner. Letting it dangle in the air, she blew on the base, causing it to flutter and flap.

After a few moments, Senri, after taking a sip of her usual sweetened coffee, responded. "Is that really how you feel?"

"Huh?"

"Do you really feel like you have no idea about what you're going to do with your life? I mean, you realize what you just did, don't you? You just *shouted* at an adult for the sake of the unheard. For people who have no one else to defend them."

"Oh... Oh god, I regret everything..." Hinae herself was surprised at how she

had acted; it was as if her mouth had moved completely on its own, and her thoughts had come pouring out in turn.

“There are still so many children with CCS that are hospitalized... a great number of which won’t be discharged anytime soon.” Senri kept her eyes downcast, trying to hold back her emotions.

Suddenly, Hinae remembered something. She looked at Senri. “Is... Is Kawahara one of them?”

“I’m afraid so... I’ll be going to visit him very soon.”

“Oh...”

Kawahara Masashi was one of Senri’s classmates and a childhood friend of hers. He had been acting as the vice president of the student council until the events of the Return of New Gen, where he was hospitalized. During his time in that position, however, Senri had existed in the form of Kurusu Nono, so while he had essentially been her right-hand man for the longest time, that had been for Nono, not Senri.

Hinae did not ask how Senri had explained the truth behind her identity to him, nor how exactly he had taken the news. It must not have been easy for either of them to come to terms with, even if they eventually had. The fact that Kawahara had not yet been able to leave the hospital, however, provided at least somewhat of a lens to the situation.

It did not matter how exactly one came to accept the truth—the biggest factor in doing so would always be time.

“Okay, so, what does me yelling at some lady have to do with anything?” asked Hinae.

“What do you mean?”

“Like, we’re talking about how I don’t know what I’m gonna do with my life. What does me yelling at some lady have to do with that?”

“Ohhh, I see what you’re asking now,” Senri said with a nod. Then, as if to switch gears, she took a sip of her coffee and returned her hands to the keyboard. “I just think that, if you have enough passion to argue with someone so ardently, you have a reason to assume you have something to fight for. Something to move forward for... or maybe even toward.”

“Huh.” Even if Senri’s words had only been meant to console her, Hinae still found herself feeling happy.

In an attempt to hide her flushed face from her friend, she let her face fall onto the desk and started to blow on the worksheet once again; it fluttered and flapped softly. Hinae knew she would not be able to focus on her work should she return to it—something Senri could hardly blame her for.

On Hinae’s desk sat the goodie bag that Ms. Ishiwata had left for her. As she gazed at it idly, her mind drifted off to thoughts of her son, Keisuke. But his mother’s words refused to leave her mind.

Hinae's anger—her frustration—was palpable. And yet, even then, there was someone who was likely suffering far, far worse than she.

Keisuke.

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Thursday, December 22nd, 2016

Assembly Day

For all those who had begun intermittently reattending school after the summer's end, it was the last day of school before winter break, making it the first long period of time off since the school had reopened. The number of students gathered in the gymnasium was less than 70% of what it had been prior to the school's temporary closing, and yet, the atmosphere was unusually enthusiastic—perhaps due to the latent sense of freedom that came with a break from routine.

The main topics of conversation among the students were what their plans were to celebrate following the assembly, as well as various remarks about the large number of parents gathered in the back of the gymnasium; the reason for this was because all of the chairs reserved for parents were already occupied, requiring the vast majority to stand. Additionally, perhaps because it was the first assembly for those that had been able to attend following the school's reopening, several students were gossiping about the committee, voicing their excitement toward seeing the upcoming presentation. This particular topic was so widespread, it was impossible not to overhear conversation after conversation about it—much to a few's chagrin.

The committee would be going up on the stage soon for their presentation. "I can't do this. I'm going home," Hana would say, but despite her many attempts to flee, Hinae somehow managed to keep her from doing so.

"Look, I wanna go home just as badly as you do—if not more," Hinae said. "But we can't. And you *know* we can't. We've gotta stick it out."

"Nobody told me so many people were gonna be here... I'm gonna pass out... maybe..." Hana choked out. "I'm going home...!"

Hinae and the other committee members had been told beforehand to wait in the equipment room located by the side of the stage. They were supposed to stay inside until their name was called, but Hana couldn't resist taking a quick peek around the gymnasium. As her eyes swam across the sea of people, the sea only grew wider and wider, and her face paler and paler—until eventually, her legs were wobbling so hard that she was barely able to keep standing.

“Look, I get that you’re a total shut-in who does pretty much nothing but play video games all day. And I know that asking someone like you to speak in front of this many people is crazy, but—” Hinae tried to say.

“No. I’m leaving. I can’t go out there and pull that much aggro. *I can’t,*” Hana said.

“Oh, come on, just listen to me! Stop saying you can’t do this—you *can*!”

Their presentation was scheduled for the very end of the assembly. Curious as to why exactly this was, Senri had asked a teacher about it, who explained that it was because the speech was effectively going to serve as the main event for a great number of parents. The school would give their opening speech, followed by an explanation of the curriculum that was in place for the following semester, then a showcase of their new policies for how the staff would manage the school. Only after those two things was the committee’s presentation slated to begin, and as far as some people were concerned, that was the only part that mattered.

“Keep your voices down, you two...! They can hear you...!” Senri shouted in a hushed voice. She had just returned from checking on the equipment that they were planning to use for the presentation; Mizuki and Machi were with her, and when they saw Hinae and Hana, they gave a set of strained smiles. They likely knew full well what was going on with them.

“Mizuki, sub in for me. I can’t do this,” Hana begged.

“I can’t! You’re the leader, here!” Mizuki protested.

“Okay, then you do it, Machi.”

“What?! Me?! You seriously think *I* can do it?” Machi said.

“U-Uh, okay, you can go up with Mizuki then! Y-Yeah, that works. I’m going home now, so good luck you two—”

“Kazuki.” Suddenly, Senri reached out and grasped the side of Hana’s face firmly. Without moving a single step from where she stood, and with strength that greatly betrayed her small stature, she tightened her grip and pulled Hana toward her by the cheek, bringing her right up to her face.

With a frightening smile stretching from ear to ear, and emphasizing her words as clearly as humanly possible, she said, “Now, I’m only going to say this one more time. *They can hear you. Through the walls. You NEED. TO BE. QUIETER.*”

“Okay...!” Hana tried to squeak out, but because of how tightly her face was held in place, she could only mouth it.

“Now. Listen to me, Hana,” Senri continued. “You are the committee chair. The president. You *have* to give this presentation. I will be going after you, and I will be representing the entire student council when I do so. I will be taking the brunt of everything. If anything goes wrong on your part, I will do my utmost to salvage it. It will be *all right. Do you understand?*”

You better understand—or at least just say you do, Hinae signaled to Hana with

her eyes, and Hana nodded her head at a blistering speed to show her agreement. Mizuki and Machi, meanwhile, had taken several fearful steps backward; they had yet to grow accustomed to the Empress's true nature.

Upon being released, Hana silently crept over to the nearest corner and began punching the wall. The sound reverberated throughout the room.

"Kazuki?" Senri said, and Hana immediately stopped.

"I want to die..." she said. Her shoulders slumped low as could be, she then ceased moving entirely.

"Is all the tech set up right?" Hinae asked Senri.

"Yes. We should be good to go. But..." she hesitated. She then beckoned Hinae to come with her; stepping up to the door with her, Senri opened it just enough to make a gap to peek through, then signaled outward toward the gymnasium with her eyes. "Look."

Confused, Hinae followed Senri's line of sight. Behind the section for the students, situated in the front row designated for the parents, sat a woman who they had grown very familiar with: Ms. Ishiwata. Her arms and legs were crossed, and she was staring intently toward the empty podium.

"She certainly looks like she's ready to cause problems..." Senri said, and Hinae nodded. That was when she noticed something else: the two reporters from that magazine were sitting right next to her. They both held a pen and a pad of paper in their hands, clearly champing at the bit.

Hinae felt equally as surprised as she did apathetic; it seemed to her that Ms. Ishiwata had fully enchanted the two reporters, and now, they followed her whims to the letter. This was quite the feat, and Hinae acknowledged such.

Suddenly, the sound from the large speakers boomed, and the teacher who was to lead the assembly began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen. It is time for us at Hekiho Academy to commence this momentous end-of-year assembly. Please be seated—should there be any available to you, that is," they said. "Now, we will begin with an opening statement from our vice principal."

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From the very moment her speech had begun, Hana had been tormented by a raging torrent of chills ripping their way down her spine.

The instant her name had been called and she'd crept out from beside the stage, her complexion had raced right past pale and gone straight to green. The manuscript she held had been crumpled by her nervous hands, her legs were shaking, and, to make matters worse, her arms and legs jutted out with almost impressive rigidity. Much to her horror, even before she had reached the podium that housed the microphone, she had already drawn more than enough attention to herself.

Without really thinking, Hinae quipped, “Oh wow, I didn’t know they made robots so lifelike...” and Senri elbowed her.

The presentation then began at a speed at which none had ever heard Hana speak before.

“Hello everyone my name is Kazuki Hana I’m the president of the Students for the Betterment of Student Autonomy and Conditions Committee so to begin please direct your eyes at the screen thank you. Pictured on the screen is a graph that summarizes the information present in the pamphlet we handed out prior to beginning this pie chart shows the common concerns held among those with CCS with the most prominent being anxieties about daily life followed by future career opportunit—”

Suddenly, a loud *THUMP!* tore through the gymnasium, stopping Hana dead in her tracks. It was Senri; having taken up a position not atop the stage, but beside it, she had roughly tapped the microphone that had been placed there.

Taken aback, Hana stared out at the audience like a deer in the headlights—until the realization of her misstep clicked into place with a sharp, “Oh...!” The projector had not been turned on yet.

Senri gave a subtle nod to Hana, and with a slow, deliberate move of her hands, she tapped the tablet that she had prepared. The pie chart Hana had mentioned during the speech then appeared on the projector screen behind her.

The audience laughed and giggled among themselves. As upset as this made Hinae, the option of loudly rebuking the crowd was obviously not available to her. Turning to Hana, who was frozen stiff on the stage, she mouthed, *“It’s all right! Keep going!”*

After a moment, Hana somehow managed to unfreeze and nod at Hinae. Then, she gazed at the contents displayed on the projector screen and began to speak once more—this time at a much slower pace.

“P-Pictured on the screen is a graph that summarizes the information shared in the pamphlet we passed out beforehand. As you can see, this pie chart we put together shows the most common concerns held among those with CCS, with the most prominent being anxieties about daily life, followed by future career opportunities, health problems, and so on.”

Her voice was shaky, but everything she had to say was written in the script she held in her hands, so while she might have stumbled a bit here and there, there were no major mistakes made. As Hana continued the presentation, Senri, who was very accustomed to these things due to her position in the student council, handled the slideshow displayed on the projector screen; she was in charge of changing the slides, as well as pausing when it would be most effective to enhance Hana’s statements.

Before long, the initial murmurs and giggles gradually died down, and all private conversations ceased. Everyone was now gazing intently at the projector as Hana spoke.

“N-Now, I would like to take the opportunity to answer a few of the many questions that were asked of us while we were gathering data. To begin, let me address how those with CCS may choose to handle the press.

“When a reporter asks any CCS patient—regardless of whether they’ve recovered or not—a question about their syndrome or their experiences with it, they are not under any obligation to answer. The same applies to healthcare workers. If pressed further, the patient may simply answer: ‘I’m afraid I can’t answer that. Please contact the school for any questions.’”

Hana stumbled for a moment. “Um... if... uh— Oh! R-Regarding physical symptoms that are often attributed to the syndrome—for example, headaches, muscle aches, etc.—the opinion of medical professionals is that none of these can be definitively traced back to CCS. In fact, there have been a great number of patients who have gone to the hospital complaining of headaches and all other manner of physical symptoms, but in every such case, they are always diagnosed to be purely psychological. So while it may be true that there are still a great number of unknowns about this syndrome, we must ask that you be patient, as well as keep up with the latest research when making decisions.”

Gazing across the audience, Hinae saw just how earnestly they were all listening to Hana’s presentation. It was genuinely resonating with them.

Hinae thought back to what Senri had said back when she had been preparing the script. *“When you wish to convey something to an audience, all you truly need to get your point across is a story, and a few concrete examples to reinforce it.”*

Another emotion Hinae felt from the crowd was a slight sense of disquietude—they were listening to a presentation forged from their very own voices, after all. The parents, meanwhile, seemed to be far less engaged, and far less receptive; even though they weren’t talking, it still felt to Hinae that they weren’t truly listening.

As Hana continued, partway through the presentation, she made a slight mistake, causing Senri to have to travel backward in the slideshow; this resulted in a significant increase in the time spent during the presentation. Aside from that, however, the speech eventually reached its end without any major incident.

“That is... That concludes the first half... of our presentation. Thank... Thank you... for... your time...” Nearly out of breath, Hana at last brought her part to a close.

Applause erupted from the audience. Hana bowed from atop the platform, and the other committee members bowed in turn. Then, the second she was free, she wobbled off toward the side of the stage like a reanimated corpse; to redirect the crowd’s attention, Senri gave a single sharp cough. It was time for the second—and final—presenter to take the stage.

However, right when Hinae was about to say, “Go finish this,” she was interrupted by the assembly emcee. “Thank you very much, President of SBSAC,” they said. “We have one more presenter left to take the stage, but before that, we will be taking a short recess. Thank you.”

What?! Hinae's eyes practically shouted at the emcee. She had not been informed of there being any intermissions planned. However, despite the urgency in her expression, the emcee did not notice—for he was focused entirely on the many parents stationed at the back of the gym. Obvious fatigue was written all over their faces, and those who were standing had resigned to leaning against the walls behind them.

"We will resume in ten minutes. Parents, if any of you would be willing to give up your seats, please do so for our lovely families toward the back. Thank you."

Oh. I get it now, Hinae thought to herself with a nod. The emcee had made the right call—the presentation *was* running long.

Senri let out a small sigh. "Well, we play with the hands we're dealt. Arimura, go get Kazuki something to drink."

"Huh? Does she need one?"

"Of *course* she needs one. Now, she didn't come back to us from up on the stage, so she's likely ducking in the corner of the equipment room," Senri then paused. "Although... technically speaking, you're not supposed to eat or drink back here... so be sneaky about it. All right?"

Senri was right—Hana had not come out from the equipment room following her retreat from the stage. At the very least, however, she was not punching the walls—none of the girls could hear any dull thuds.

With a nod, Hinae headed for the gymnasium entrance. However, right as she took her first step, her eyes met with the seated Ms. Ishiwata's. Stopping in her tracks, Hinae gasped.

She was smiling. Clear as could be. And as far as Hinae was concerned, it was no ordinary smile—it was a sinister, sinister sneer. A sneer that said, *"Is that it?"* She was sitting still and with her legs crossed; in all likelihood, she was not going to be one of the people willing to give up their seats.

Hinae's hands balled together into fists, and she ducked her head down. She had to focus on the task at hand: buying her best friend a drink that she needed.

And so, with her face pointed squarely at the floor, Hinae left the gymnasium.

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"Arimura?"

Suddenly, as Hinae was buying a bottle of tea from the school vending machine, she heard her name being called. Turning around, she saw who it was.

Keisuke.

When he got closer, he furrowed his eyebrows. "Something wrong?" he said.

Taking a deep breath, Hinae responded, "Huh? Nah, I'm good. What up, Ishiwata?"

“I liked the presentation. I really feel like I learned a lot.”

“Oh, dang, really? Awesome! Hana’s gonna be psyched when I tell her.”

“Oh, yeah, speaking of Hana—she really kicked ass up there. Even if it did take her a bit to find her footing,” Keisuke said with a laugh. Hinae smiled—he was right, she had indeed kicked ass.

Hinae went to turn around to head back toward the gymnasium, but when she did, she realized that Keisuke wasn’t doing the same; he simply looked up at her as he kept his face glued to the floor. It seemed like he was having trouble bringing himself to say something.

“Something wrong?” Hinae asked.

“O-Oh, uh... I just...” he said, hesitating. “Did my mom... say something to you?”

“Huh?”

“Sorry, I know I should’ve asked you this sooner, but you just seemed so busy... Regardless, though, the reason I ask is because, right when I got home one night—a few days ago, I think?—she suddenly hit me with, ‘That committee your friend’s in is a joke.’”

“Oh. That’s what you mean. If I had to guess, that was probably on Monday.”

It had likely happened on the same day as when Ms. Ishiwata had come by the committee room with gifts.

“I assumed she talked to you in some capacity. She didn’t really elaborate when I asked, but I could just tell,” Keisuke said.

“Yeah, well, you’re right. Wasn’t much of a talk or anything, though—she just dropped by and asked about the committee and my future and stuff.”

“You’re kidding...” Scratching the back of his head awkwardly, Keisuke muttered a timid, “God, I’m so sorry...” Then, suddenly, his head shot upward as if something had just occurred to him. “Wait a second... Is *that* what’s going on?”

“Huh?”

“Okay, you know how I told you I was gonna get a job after I graduated?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, my plan is to work for my mom.”

Hinae gasped. “Oh god, you’re not saying what I think you’re saying, are you?”

“My mom works an office job, so that’s where I’ll be going. She already talked it over with the management and everything... and she said she couldn’t wait any longer for the committee to get up and running.”

Hinae fell silent. Until...

Snap.

Deep within her skull, a sound clearly reverberated. Her hand gripped the bottle of tea tightly.

Her next question was an obvious one. “Are you really okay letting it end like that?” she said.

“Am I... Pfft. Okay, I get it. Nice,” he said with a laugh. “‘Why is it like this,’ right?”

Snap.

Snap.

Snap.

The sound of ripping and tearing continued.

“Yeah... Why is it like this?” Hinae repeated after him. Even after everything, the absurdity of the situation made her very, very angry.

“Why is it like this?” Why is it like this...? Is that what you’re going to say in the future once you’ve finally chosen a path? You’ll just accept your situation without doing anything to change it?

“Ishiwata,” Hinae said firmly. “I won’t *let* it be like this.”

However, even if Keisuke were to have responded, Hinae would not have been able to hear it; for she was already running at full speed straight to the gym.

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“I need to do the presentation!” Bursting into the equipment room where Senri and the others had been waiting for her, Hinae made her intentions clear.

“What on earth happened out there?” Senri said with a frown; she was still taking care of Hana, who was very clearly both mentally and physically exhausted. Even still, Mizuki, Machi, and she all seemed to sense the same thing as Senri: something had happened to Hinae.

“Doesn’t matter. Senri, please let me do the presentation,” Hinae said.

“Now, hold on a second here. Something happened out there and I want to know what.”

Hinae hesitated for a second. “Ishiwata’s mom. That’s your answer.”

“What? Did she say something?”

Hinae attempted to explain everything that had just occurred, but she found herself at a loss for how to justify her current actions. A fire had been lit inside her, and the perfect word used to describe the raging inferno came to her immediately.

Fury.

That was one of the largest motivators behind her desire to take the reins. “Do

you remember what happened back on Monday? When she came by the committee room?" Hinae said.

Senri nodded.

"I can't remember word-for-word the stuff she threw at us, but I do remember one thing she said *very* well: 'I understand how you feel.'"

As she spoke, Hinae thought back to the smile of resignation she had seen on Keisuke's face just moments ago. Perhaps he knew just as well as Hinae did that his mother was acting out of consideration for him, and *only* him—and had thus simply accepted those circumstances. He was going to sit back and accept a future that had been decided not by him, but *for* him.

"It's insane. 'I know how you feel.' She said that. To us! To *me*!" Hinae shouted, enraged.

A good friend of hers who lived someplace far, far away... he had acted for the sake of the person he cared about most. He had put his own future and all the things he'd wished to do aside for the sake of that one person.

The words that flooded out of Hinae's mouth were raw and unfiltered. "How *dare* she claim to know how *I* feel? The reason we're even *here* right now debating our conditions instead of rotting away in a bunch of hospital beds is because of someone she never even knew! Yet there she was, a person who *never had* CCS, saying that to me! And sure, maybe I'm being unfair. Maybe I'm being ridiculous. Or hysterical. Or whatever other words they want to throw at me. But you're seriously telling me you have the gall to not only walk up to me like you know everything, but to say you 'know how I feel'? YOU DON'T KNOW A GODDAMN THING!"

Hinae heard her own yell reverberate throughout the small room. Her vision had begun to blur with tears—a fact she only just now realized. Mizuki and Machi looked at her with fright; Senri and Hana, however, were very, very different. Their faces shone with compassion and understanding.

Having made up her mind, Senri handed the script to her dear friend with a strong nod. "Knock 'em dead," she said.

For a brief moment, Hinae couldn't even process that she was being spoken to; her emotions were boiling over.

"Okay, here. The summary I was going to give as student council president is included in there, so be sure to ignore that bit," Senri said in an attempt to snap her out of it. "You only need to use what would fit with what you mean to say. As we're low on time, you'll have to improvise—but you have always been stellar at that. You and I both know that mouth of yours never stops moving—and that's not even to mention you being president of the Literature Club."

"Oh..."

Only when Senri had laid that all out for her did Hinae realize: there were indeed things in that script intended for the student council president to present.

Seemingly having read her mind, Senri continued. “It’s all right. It will still convey what it needs to without me. Besides, even if there was time for me to say my piece, the emcee already said the next presenter will be the last one, so we play with the hands we’re dealt. In other words, don’t worry. Say whatever you feel you need to say.”

Hinae fell silent. Gazing at Senri—at the Empress—she couldn’t help but admire just how incredible she was.

Suddenly, Hinae remembered what she had even left for in the first place. She turned to offer the bottle of tea to Hana, but the moment she did, Hana immediately rejected it. “No,” she said. “I want you to have it. And then... I want you to kick ass.”

“Heh... Gracias, Hana,” Hinae said with a smile. “I’d kiss you, but I gotta run. Wish me luck!”

An announcement from over the loudspeaker sounded, leaking through the cracks in the door; the intermission had concluded.

Hinae looked down at the script Senri had written, only to find herself very surprised at the contents. Senri was about to leave the room, but before she could, Hinae stopped her. She then pointed at the manuscript. “Hey, Senri?” she said. “Were you really... Were you really gonna say...?”

With a smile, Senri answered, “Do my words perhaps overlap a little with yours?”

Hinae nodded; she would have never imagined these words coming out of Senri’s mouth, especially considering her position as student council president.

“While I said nothing at the time, I must admit that I felt—*and* feel—the exact same as you. When she said she understood how we felt... It's been a long time since I’ve felt so much anger. Forgive me for saying this, but... I’m afraid that I wanted nothing more than to punch her lights out.”

“I wanted to punch her lights out.”

It was an awfully unusual thing for Senri to say, and the way she’d said it made it all the more charming; a smile rose to Hinae’s face.

“This next speech will be our final one for the day. Please welcome to the stage, Vice President of the Students for the Betterment of Student Autonomy and Conditions Committee, Minamisawa Senri.”

As the emcee’s voice rang throughout the gym, Hinae emerged from the side of the stage and approached the podium. Murmurs and whispers exploded among the crowd; both parents and students alike realized the name announced did not match the face present onstage. A sea of confusion and suspicion overtook the crowd.

Located at the side of the stage along with Hana and the others, the emcee who was leading the assembly hurriedly whispered something to Senri; Senri, however, didn’t move a single muscle. She simply looked at Hinae and signaled to

her with her eyes.

And so, with a nod, Hinae bowed to the crowd, then stepped up to the podium.

“Hello, everyone,” she began. “My name is Arimura Hinae, and I am a member of the Students for the Betterment of Student Autonomy and Conditions Committee. Even though I have only been a member of this lovely committee for but a single month, today, I am taking the podium in lieu of my good friend, Minamisawa Senri. Today, my goal is to convey and express to you all the thoughts, emotions, and experiences we have shared together as a community over the past few years.”

The buzz of the crowd grew louder, and several other teachers crowded Senri, shouting at her in hushed voices. Even still, she did not return their urgency by responding to them—instead, she focused all her energy toward Hinae, gesturing fervently to her. *“Don’t worry about them! Just go!”* her whole body screamed.

There was no stopping her now.

However, just when Hinae was about to truly begin her speech, a certain, very appalled boy sitting among the sea of students caught her eye.

Keisuke.

That’s it. I’ll start there.

Regardless of the many experiences that had brought Hinae here today, the feelings smoldering inside her right at that moment were due greatly in part to none other than Keisuke and his mother.

Shifting her eyes to the woman that had set her alight, she stared intently at the section where she and the two reporters sat. The three of them gazed back up at her, eyes full of discontent.

Senri’s words resurfaced in Hinae’s mind. *“When you wish to convey something to an audience, all you truly need to get your point across is a story, and a few concrete examples to reinforce it.”*

Yeah, that’ll work just fine, Hinae thought to herself. Then, she began; alit became the ardent flame that burned within her, and the speech spilled forth from her entire being.

“The other day, I was hanging out with three of my friends—two boys, and one girl. Though, to tell you the truth, it wasn’t just a normal hangout—it was a date. A double date,” she said.

Hinae apologized internally to Keisuke and Masuda—the latter of which was likely also somewhere in the audience—for crafting a story from the experience they had shared together. She then gazed sideways toward Senri and quickly noted the sullen expression on her face.

The number of voices that were clearly suspicious of her ability to give a proper speech began to rise once more. However, Hinae refused to pay them any mind.

“The girl I was with is a member of the committee, and a very good friend of

mine. Now, she and I have spent countless hours tearing through pretty much every store or restaurant you can think of. But that day was the first time I had ever hung out with those two guys," she continued. "We decided on Shibuya as our place to be, and when the four of us all got together in front of the main station, the first thing one of the boys said to me was, 'Oh, yeah, might as well apologize. We would take you somewhere better, but neither of us really, uh, know anywhere else to go.' You can't even imagine how sorry they looked—actually, I'm sure the students in front of me can. But I can't say the same for the parents and teachers. And that's one of the things I came up here to say: I don't really think they understand how we actually feel."

Suddenly, a great number of students immediately quieted down.

"Nowadays, it's pretty rare for a student from Hekiho to actually pick Shibuya as a spot to hang out in. Why do you think that is? Well, I'll tell you. It's because, as long as you're in Shibuya, it doesn't matter where you go—*everything* reminds you of your condition. You can't get away from it. *Everything* screams at you about just how much CCS ruined your life. You look around, and all the memories of just how sick you were—of all the sensations you've tried so, *so* hard to forget—come rushing back. Even the *scenery* reminds you of it.

"To give a more concrete example... Take a Shibuya bookstore. Doesn't matter which one you choose, they're all filled to the brim with books and magazines about the syndrome. You don't even get the luxury of leaving the real world behind and escaping into a good book—you know, the thing they're *designed* to let you do? And it doesn't help that Shibuya is every tourist's favorite place to gawk at, since it's *'the place where it all began'* and all. But let's get back to the date."

Hinae looked at Keisuke. The appalled look on his face had disappeared; it was clear that he was listening intently to her every word.

"Anyway, I told the boys that it wasn't a big deal, and we went on with the day. The four of us chose a shop, but it wasn't on the ground floor, so we had to take an elevator. But when we stepped onto that elevator... every one of us just... shut down for a second. None of us said a word, but we all knew what we were feeling. Do you want to know why we shut down like that?" Hinae paused for a moment. "The mirror. There was a single, hauntingly large mirror hanging right smack in the middle of the elevator. And for a while there, we were left, essentially, paralyzed. Not a single one of us wanted to see ourselves in it.

"I will never forget the first time I looked in the mirror when I was at the hospital, and I'm sure I'm far from alone in that. Some of us developed a deep phobia of mirrors because of that very moment, and some of us still need treatment to help us cope with it. Some of us have it so bad that they can't even leave the hospital. Some of our brains don't even let us *perceive* reflections anymore. Doesn't matter how big it is, nor what exactly is actually doing the reflecting. Could be glass, could be a sheet of metal that's been polished to a mirror sheen—they can't see a thing. That's the degree of trauma we're dealing with here. And you know, I've been wondering something: Have any of the teachers in the audience even *noticed* that, ever since we started coming to school

again, the blinds and curtains are almost always closed?"

As she said that line, Hinae gestured in the direction of the teachers; a number of students followed her gaze, looking back toward the same area as her. The teachers who were standing beside Senri suddenly looked deeply uncomfortable; then, as if trying to escape the question that had been posed to them, they slunk back a few steps.

"But that's neither here nor there. Anyway, the four of us had our double date at this somewhat high-end restaurant the two guys liked going to every now and then," she continued. "Close by where we sat down, there was a different table with a couple around the same age as us. Judging from the conversation they were having, they were high school students that went to two different high schools. Specifically, they were talking about their futures; the girl said she planned to go to college, but the guy was still pretty up in the air. I still remember what he said. He cracked a smile, and he goes, 'Honestly, I don't even care. Even if you graduate from a good college and get a nice job at a half-decent company, you'll still end up a wage slave like everybody else. And if you go for a job without going to college, it's pretty much guaranteed that the only people who'll hire you will exploit you for everything you're worth. I'm screwed either way, so why worry about it?' And y'know, when I heard that, I thought to myself: 'Oh, would you look at that: another loser blaming the world for his problems instead of himself. Like, what, does he expect the entire world to cater to him? Talk about being a spoiled brat.' That, and I also thought, 'Man, I'm glad none of *us* are like that.'

"Well, the other day, the school conducted a survey on us, the seniors—a survey that asked whether we were aiming for higher education, or if we were going to shoot for a job instead. The overwhelming majority of students chose the former, and the reason for this is one my fellow club member already illustrated to you: the world is not ready for us ex-CCS patients to integrate into society—both in terms of proper societal awareness and etiquette, as well as legislature. Now, keep that in mind when I tell you: when I heard what that couple was talking about? I got angrier then I let on before. I mean, how could they just joke around about their futures like it didn't even matter? We sure as hell don't get to do that. Why do they get to be happy? I thought to myself, 'Oh, *poor baby*. Must be so hard having *infinite opportunities* available to you.'" Upon spitting that out, Hinae took a breath. "I'm not proud of how bitter I can get. I was jealous. I wish I could say that wasn't the case, but the reality is, it's far from the first time I've felt like that. *All* of us with CCS face these thoughts. That is how *every day* is for us. Dates are supposed to be fun. They *are* fun—for everyone else, that is. But for us? How many of you out there can't even go on a stupid date without dealing with all that garbage your brain throws at you?"

Not even a single student was talking anymore.

Hinae looked down at the script Senri had written for her. Finding her place along the words, she converted Senri's thoughts into her own, then continued.

"As Kazuki Hana, our committee chair, previously laid out, when we established SBSAC, we received a whole host of comments from parents. So many

people reached out to give their opinions on how we should go about things, as well as what specifically we should be targeting as a committee. For example, here's two of the suggestions we got: 'We propose that our group shall hold regular seminars in coordination with the hospital in order to convey the truth, tragedy, and reality behind the syndrome.' That's the first one. And the second one, 'We propose that we create media that shall counter disinformation about the syndrome, while disseminating the actual facts that would be obtained by partnering with proper medical professionals. The goal of this venture would be to eventually create an organization that would be operated and managed entirely by ex-CCS patients.'

"When I read them for the first time, there was only one word that came to mind: 'Hm.' Not even a word, really. I then went on to ask the teachers what they thought, and everyone I asked said that they liked them and wished to move forward with them. That, too, made me go, 'Hm.'"

Hinae looked up from the script she held in her hands. When she did, her gaze found itself pointed directly at Ms. Ishiwata. She was looking right back at her, and all the parents surrounding her were nodding their heads in approval of the proposals.

"And this might come as a shock to some of you, but if you want *my* opinion on those two suggestions... Well, with all due respect, I didn't *just* think, 'Hm.' I thought: 'Hm. These people don't have any goddamn idea what we're going through, do they?'"

The very instant those words left her mouth, the parents and teachers erupted. The expression on Ms. Ishiwata's face immediately turned to one of sheer, unrelenting anger; she violently uncrossed her legs, and, for a moment, Hinae was certain she was about to shoot upward out of her chair.

Directing her gaze over to Senri, Hinae saw that she had sneakily taken up the position in front of the emcee's podium; this was likely to keep any of the faculty from taking it to stop Hinae from speaking further.

The words Senri had written and what Hinae had adapted were practically one and the same; for when Hinae had asked Senri about her opinion on Ms. Ishiwata's proposals, Senri had had only this to say: *"I completely agree."*

"Now, I want to reiterate that what I said just now was nothing more than my personal opinion. Let me explain," Hinae continued. "When I was in the hospital back during rehab, there was one thing the nurses would tell me time and time again: 'If you work as hard as you can—if you just pull yourself up by your bootstraps—everything will eventually go back to normal.' And, I can say this with absolute certainty: everyone who has ever heard this *immediately* knows it's a lie. Forgive me for being cynical here, but as long as you're stuck with the label of 'ex-CCS patient'—as long as you're stuck with the label of *'Hekiho Academy student'*—your life will never, *ever* go back to normal. We'll never go back to being like those two normal high schoolers sitting at a normal table in a normal, somewhat-upscale restaurant.

"And then you've got those parts of the proposal where it goes, 'the truth,

tragedy, and reality behind the syndrome,' and 'The goal of this venture would be to eventually create an organization that would be operated and managed entirely by ex-CCS patients.' Do you see the problem here? It's pretty much the exact opposite of what the nurses told us at the hospital. So, to sum it up, everything will go back to normal for ex-CCS patients, but also they're these tragic little victims everyone can collectively cry about together for a while, and once their time in the spotlight's over, we'll quietly cordon them off from the rest of society so no one has to look at them anymore. So what's the actual point here? Why shoot for sympathy points with something that people who don't have the syndrome are physically incapable of sympathizing with? How are we supposed to share in some *'collective sadness'* when they have no idea how it feels to be us? You expect us CCS patients to just huddle together like we're zoo animals or something? And then what? Everyone else is our enemy? Outsiders gawking at us while they take pictures from the safety of outside the exhibit? No. So, let me be even more clear with my opinion on this: I have no intention, nor will I *ever* have any intention of moving forward with those suggestions. Period."

"Now wait just one moment!" A woman's voice cried out from the crowd; Hinae assumed it would've been Ms. Ishiwata, but in actuality, it was someone else entirely. It was a woman with a stern look on her face, and she was glaring daggers directly at Hinae; perhaps it was a parent or guardian that worked with Ms. Ishiwata.

Similar cries of, "What did she just say?!" and "What's the meaning of this?!" roared from among the crowd; and yet, as far as Hinae could tell, not a single one of those outbursts came from the students.

"Everyone, be quiet!"

Suddenly, the incredibly, incredibly firm voice of Senri sounded from the loudspeaker; she had taken the podium and was holding the microphone in her hand.

With the crowd having slightly quieted down, Hinae gave Senri a short nod, then returned to her speech.

"I will reiterate one more time: this is my *personal opinion*. If there are students who agree wholeheartedly with the proposals that were made and wish to proceed with them, you are more than welcome to come to a committee meeting and voice that opinion. We'd love to have you. However, unless those persons exist—and they are persons who would actually be affected by these proposals—I refuse to move forward with them. The notion that we should proceed with our advocacy based solely on suggestions from parents and teachers is one I *vehemently* reject. Now, some of you may be thinking, 'How dare you decide what's best for my child?!' but I ask you to consider something: while you may be our guardians—our protectors—*we* are the ones who are living our lives. *We* are the ones living in these bodies. And we are not you.

"Every day of my life, I am told to live like any normal person would, while simultaneously being told to live in a way that a normal person *never* would. These two voices scream inside my head constantly, and while they battle it out,

I'm forced to try and live my life among a sea of normal people—the people that make me see just how far from normal I really am. So, for these reasons and many, many more, I cannot bring myself to agree with these proposals."

Hinae looked at Keisuke once more; in all the time since her speech had begun, he had not once taken his eyes off of her.

"While I was on that date, the boys I was with told me about how they had failed an interview for a part-time job at a local convenience store. The owners never gave them a concrete reason on why they weren't brought on, but they both had the distinct feeling that it was because they were stuck with something they could never get rid of: they were ex-CCS patients. When they told me this, I immediately asked my girl friend—who's another member of the committee, in case you forgot—if there was anything the committee could do about it. And we both came to the same answer almost immediately. No. There was nothing we could do. He was not hired on and then wrongfully fired—he was forbidden even the very opportunity. Because of this, there was no tangible harm, and thus, no case could be built. This raises the question: 'What's even the point of the committee, then? What can we actually *do*?'"

Hinae looked at Ms. Ishiwata. Her expression was one of both anger and bewilderment; it was likely the first she had heard of Keisuke dating at all.

"My answer to this is simple. In fact, it was stated as one of the primary motivators behind the committee's founding: 'SBSAC is designed to make considerations on how to better improve the environment surrounding Chaos Child Syndrome victims.' Now, this doesn't mean that all we do is sit around 'considering' things without making any actual change. However, that doesn't mean that part of the process is unnecessary, either—far from it. In fact, it is and always will be the very first thing that we, the students of Hekiho Academy, must do in order to better the world.

"I was jealous of that couple. It was like every fiber in my body wanted what they had. And to tell you the truth, if I saw them right now, I'm pretty sure I'd feel the same way. 'How can they be so carefree? Why are they allowed to be happy when I'm not?' Even as I think back on that, I still catch myself thinking things like that. Why am I so jealous of them? Why can't I stop thinking about how much I wish I could *be* them? Maybe it's because they never had CCS. Maybe it's because they don't know anything about my suffering or my life. Or maybe it's because, unlike me, they can choose to do whatever they want, be it going off to college, or just picking out some random job they find on the street. Actually, it's probably all of that at once.

"But what I have to realize is, I don't know these people. I don't know their names—I don't even know how old they are. I have no way of knowing if they actually are carefree about their futures. If they really *are* happy. Like, if someone told me that those two had a story—that they both had terminal illnesses, but one day, they were lucky enough to move into remission, and now they were getting back together—maybe I wouldn't have been jealous. Of course, I doubt that's what their situation is, but my point is: if my impression of them can change based on learning one little thing about their lives, why do I feel the need to be

jealous of them at all?

"These are the types of things we have to consider. If we let ourselves be afraid of mirrors, glass, or anything that reflects us—if we don't want our moods ruined for the rest of the week when we see normal people our age—then we have to change everything. And we have to make that change ourselves. But the only way to do that is to give ourselves the time and space to do the first step: to consider our circumstances in their entirety. Even if it's hard to admit, yes, it's true: no matter what we do, we will always be at a disadvantage compared to the average person. And yes, people like to tell us, 'You could be dying in the streets,' 'Children are starving in Africa,' or 'There are *millions* of kids who are less fortunate than you are.' It's understandable to respond to that with a, 'So what? What am I supposed to do about that?'—but what does that change? Now take that and apply it to the rest of the world. If we simply parade around our suffering, endlessly comparing ourselves to those more fortunate than us, nothing is *ever* going to change."

That was where Senri's script ended. The gymnasium was deathly silent.

Looking up from the papers she held in her hand, Hinae searched deeply for the words she needed to express her feelings... before eventually, she found them.

"Students of Hekiho Academy. We don't know why Chaos Child Syndrome happens. We may never know, even. But what we *do* know is that all of us were completely unaware of the symptoms we had during our course with it. We all just sat back and pretended like nothing was wrong. We had our heads buried in the sand. And even if that in and of itself was caused by the syndrome, are we really going to let that happen again? I don't want to be the same person I was back when I had CCS. That person was someone who only heard what she wanted to hear—someone who never allowed anything to challenge her *or* her worldview. I won't let myself become that again. *We* can't let ourselves fall into that again.

"These are the types of things we have to consider. How do we face the future ahead of us, and what do we wish to do in that future? Every single one of us needs to consider every last detail of our daily lives. And once we have, with all the perspective we've gained, we're going to find an answer to these questions. Together. For that is the only way we can move forward."

Nearing the end of her speech, Hinae surveyed the gymnasium. Every single person in the audience was staring intently up at the podium.

Taking in all their gazes, she moved to the final sentiment she wished to share.

"Parents and teachers, I know I said a great deal of very rude things to you over the course of this speech. However, I still would like to ask of you... please help us achieve our goal. Please, help us consider each and every thing possible as we move forward to triumph over these struggles and build a better world." She bowed deeply toward their section of the crowd. "This concludes my presentation. Thank you all very much for your time."

Breathing a deep sigh of relief, Hinae then looked back up at the audience. The entire gymnasium was so silent, one could hear a pin drop. A veil of thick,

impenetrable tension weighed heavy in the air; and yet, right as Hinae was about to descend from the stage, a single, small clap sounded from the crowd.

Startled, Hinae stopped in her tracks and looked in the direction of the sound.

It was Keisuke.

And then, only a few seconds later, a loud whistle followed by further applause tore its way through the otherwise-silent room. Looking toward those sounds now, she saw Masuda holding his fingers to his mouth. He had been sitting in the farthest row away from her, and Hinae had never noticed.

A smile crept its way onto her face, and she couldn't keep herself from holding her hand up to wave at the two boys. However, right as her hand began to move, the crowd suddenly erupted into applause.

It was perhaps the loudest applause she had ever heard in her entire life.

Likely influenced by Masuda's whistling, the classmates followed his rhythm and began to chant, "Arimura! Arimura! Arimura!" in a sea of excited, high-pitched voices.

Snapping back to their senses, a faculty member rushed up to grab the microphone that Senri had returned to its home and shouted, "Settle down, everyone!"—but the symphony of applause, whistling, and cheering refused to cease.

Stepping down from the podium with a playful hop, Hinae ignored the fact that she was supposed to go to the side of the stage first, and instead chose to go straight to Senri and the others. Senri couldn't help but smile in amused, gleeful surprise at this flagrant disregard for the rules.

"I did it! I really did it!" With that joyful shout, Hinae raised her hand in the air.

With a sigh, a light shake of the head, and a, "What am I going to do with you?" Senri raised her own hand in turn, and the two high-fived with a resounding *clap*. It didn't take long for Hana and the others to raise their hands as well, and it took even less time for Hinae to high-five them all too.

The parents were taken aback at the sheer volume of excitement erupting from the crowd. The faculty continued to yell, “I said settle down!” into the microphone, but to no avail; none of the students, including Hinae, were listening.

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“Huh. Looks like someone decided on going to college after all.”

Shortly after the closing ceremony concluded, Hinae had been called to the teacher’s lounge; Senri and Hana, too, had been summoned by their homeroom teachers and were both currently being lectured on the presentation that had been given.

On the worksheet Hinae had just submitted, she had marked the box, “Higher Education.” This choice was one she had decided on only a few moments prior. “Sorry, but I haven’t picked out a school just yet,” she said.

Until the very moment the school day had ended, she had not yet decided on whether she wished to pursue higher education or find a job, and she had been fully planning on going to her homeroom teacher and pleading for just a little more time. And yet, after giving that big speech all by herself, Hinae had come to find that her feelings on the matter had, in what was almost a complete mystery to her, completely solidified themselves.

It was just as she had said herself: she had much more to consider if she wanted to forge a proper future for herself. And for her to achieve that, she needed a little more time to think, and an environment in which to do it in—an environment that could teach her everything she needed to know and expand her worldview tenfold.

“The teachers are still gonna be here for at least a couple days, right? I can make my decision by then,” Hinae said.

But her homeroom teacher shook his head. “No, Arimura,” he said. “You don’t have to rush. You can turn it in next year, even... Er, I mean, after winter break. Take all the time you need to consider your options until then.”

Hinae blinked. “What?” she said, looking at him with a puzzled expression.

Perhaps a little lost on how to proceed, the teacher scratched the back of his head. Then, as if a thought had suddenly occurred to him, he stood up from his chair and walked over to the window. Without looking back at her, he said, “You wanna know something? After your big speech at the assembly, a few students came to me and asked me a question. Every time, it was the exact same one. You wanna know what they asked? ‘Can I get my worksheet back?’”

“You’re kidding.”

“When they told me that, I would always go, ‘Fine, you’ve twisted my arm...’ before giving it back to them. I then let them know that I wouldn’t be asking them to submit it until after winter break. So you can follow in their example.”

With those words, the homeroom teacher then closed the curtains. Just like that, the reflection in the window was sealed away.

“Thank you so much! I won’t forget this!” Hinae said with a bow of her head. Then, without waiting another second, she left the teacher’s lounge with her worksheet in hand.

Letting the survey sway back and forth as she walked, she remembered this one scene from this one book she’d read. In it, this one character had been holding on to a document just like the one she was holding now, before eventually deciding to fold it into a paper airplane and cast it out the window.

Of course, she was well aware that she did not have that much freedom—her teacher had closed the curtains, after all.

Guess that’s where I’ll start, then, she thought to herself.

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One day later, on the first day of winter vacation, Hinae stood in the same trendy restaurant from the double date. She had made a call to Keisuke shortly before arriving, so he was there with her, too. And while she had considered going somewhere outside of Shibuya, Keisuke told her that he had plans for later that day, and thus made the obvious, much more nearby suggestion.

“Listen, Ishiwata. I’ve been thinking long and hard about it, but... I’m sorry. I can’t go out with you...” Looking straight at Keisuke, Hinae bowed her head apologetically as she delivered her rejection. The air around them was thick with pain and discomfort, but she knew that she could no longer continue toying with the boy’s feelings as she had been.

“Oh...” he said softly. Raising her head back up to look at the boy, Hinae saw that he had a weak smile on his face. “Heh. That’s okay. I kind of already knew that’s what you were gonna say.”

“Huh?”

Hinae was surprised at how well he was taking the rejection. They had dealt with a lot together due to his mother, after all, and it was clear to anyone that the two of them had grown closer.

“Remember that day when I called you to the hospital? Well, when we were walking back home, we stopped by the park. That’s... I think that’s when I knew what your answer was,” Keisuke explained.

“Oh god, what did I say?” Hinae said in horror.

“You didn’t say anything. It’s... because of Miyashiro, isn’t it?”

“Oh...”

His words called back to mind something that had happened prior to them parting ways at the park. As she had been gazing at the spot where Miyashiro’s RV had used to be, Keisuke had tried to say something to her.

“While you were standing there, staring, my plan was to apologize again, but this time, I’d make up for it by asking you out on a date for that weekend. That’s what I asked back then: ‘Do you have plans this weekend?’”

“Oh no… Ishiwata, I didn’t mean to—”

“No, no, it’s okay,” Keisuke reassured her. “I’m right… aren’t I? Miyashiro’s behind it all. Everyone knows that he used to live in that spot you were staring at. And when I saw that look on your face…. I dunno, I think I just knew, right then and there.”

“No, no, no, you’ve got it all wrong.”

“Do I?”

His expression of doubt left Hinae at a loss for words. It was indeed an incorrect conclusion—or at least, it wasn’t the entire reason behind why she had chosen to reject him. No, the full truth of the matter was, Hinae simply couldn’t wrap her head around dating someone as she was now. Yes, she would still think about her good friend who resided someplace far, far away—but she never compared Keisuke to him. The only person she ever compared to him… was herself.

“Okay, maybe you’re right. I guess it is because of Miyashiro.” A slight hint of resignation in her voice, Hinae smiled as she spoke.

Keisuke nodded. “Right. I’m gonna head off, then,” he said, getting up from his seat.

Hinae nearly said, *‘Wait, you’re going already?’* but she stopped herself—she knew in her heart it just wasn’t the best thing for her to say in that moment.

Hinae’s expression was a difficult one to read, leading Keisuke to hurriedly wave his hand in an attempt to clear the air. “No, no, it’s not, uh… it’s not because I’m mad at you or anything. I’ve just gotta get to my mom’s office,” he said. “I’m gonna check it out and see how I feel about it.”

“Wait, what? Really?”

“Yep,” Keisuke said with a smile. “I sat down with my mom yesterday. I asked her to give me a little more time to think about whether or not I actually wanted to work for her in the future. It’s funny—that’s the first fight we’ve had in a real long time. But, after everything cooled off, I asked her to take me to the place she works and show me around. I thought, maybe if I go there, I’ll see something that’ll help me figure out what I wanna do. That maybe, just maybe, I’ll change my mind while I’m there, and I’ll decide I actually want to go to college instead.”

“Huh. Good for you, dude.”

“Really, I can’t begin to tell you how good your speech was. Sure, my mom was totally pissed, but… I dunno, you really made her think. I remember her yelling at a reporter over the phone when we were both home last night—she was telling him that she wanted him to publish a transcript of your speech word-for-word.”

“You’re kidding.”

This was the first Hinae had heard of this. It was a big surprise to her—after all, her words had been far from kind.

This is gonna be a whole thing, isn't it...? she thought to herself.

Keisuke waved his hand goodbye. "Welp, I'll see you at school."

"Yeah. See you at school," Hinae said. "Oh, and, uh... thanks for what you did back there."

"Huh? Back where?"

"Back at the presentation. You were the first person to clap."

"Ohhh..." A slight hint of embarrassment colored his face. "It's not like I actually did anything."

"That's where you're wrong, monsieur," Hinae said. "Being the first person to take a step... no one else has it harder."

Hinae knew this very well. It was something she so desperately wished to tell that good friend of hers—but she knew that no matter what, she never could. Not to his face.

"You did more than you know," she said.

A warm silence filled the room for a moment. Then, Keisuke murmured, "Okay. You're right."

"I'm always right."

"Heh. See ya, Arimura."

"Yeah. Adiós gracias."

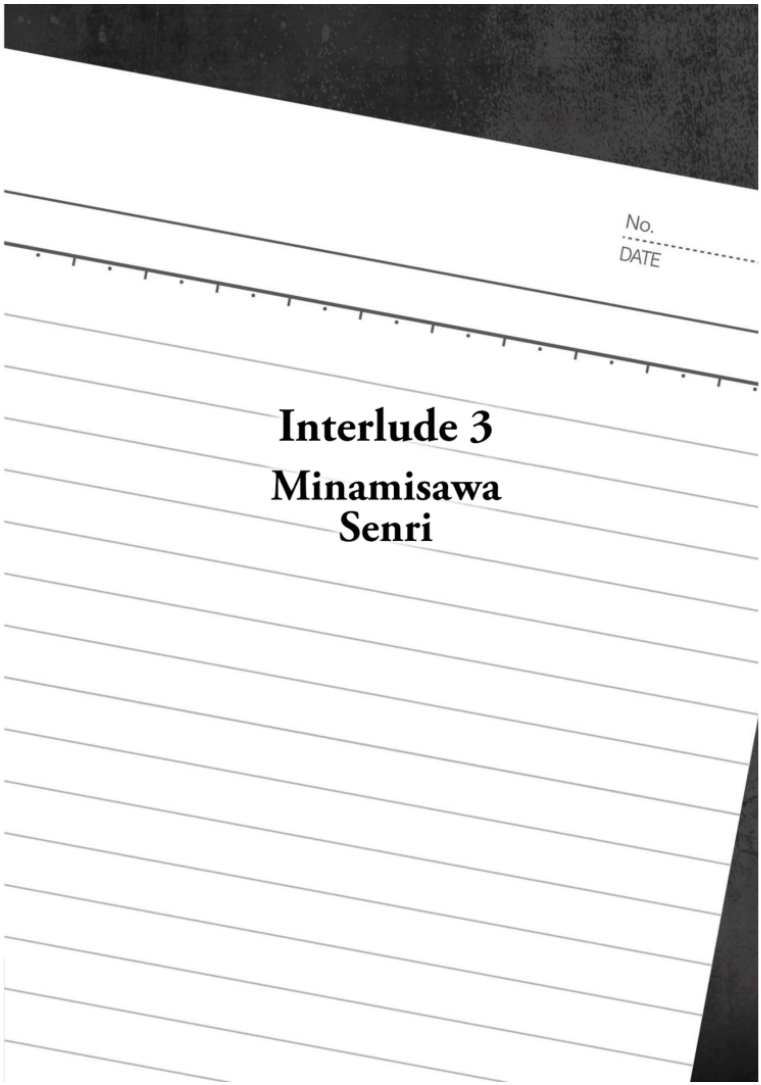
With a wave of her hand, Hinae saw off the boy, and he too raised a hand in farewell. Leaving the restaurant herself, Hinae took out her cell phone as she walked in the direction of the station. She began to draft a text to Senri, telling her that she had turned Keisuke down; however, as she typed, she realized that she didn't yet know what exactly had happened between her friend and Masuda—so she added a question asking about just that into her message.

The temperature in the air had turned as frigid as could be, but the skies were clear as day—the perfect weather to accompany the first day of winter vacation. This year, Christmas Eve—set to arrive the following day—fell on a weekend, rendering the crowded streets of Shibuya even more crowded than usual. A sea of red-and-white decor lined each and every store, making the Christmas cheer feel all the more evident.

As she walked through the winter's day, Hinae felt the sudden urge to burst into a gleeful sprint—to shout from the rooftops so loud, even the heavens above would hear her. This was an emotion she had not felt for years and years, and she was immediately awash with feelings of intense warmth.

Perhaps... today, for the first time in a very long while, she would sit down at her desk and write.

As long as you're stuck with the label of 'ex-CCS patient'—as long as you're stuck with the label of *'Hekiho Academy student'*—your life will never, *ever* go back to normal. We'll never go back to being like those two normal high schoolers sitting at a normal table in a normal, somewhat upscale restaurant.
However, I still would like to ask of you... please help us achieve our goal. Please, help us consider each and every thing possible as we move forward to triumph over these struggles and build a better world.



Interlude 3

Minamisawa Senri

Dear Takuru,

When all was said and done, I believe our committee's presentation at the end-of-year assembly went swimmingly... Although I suppose it was more *Arimura's* presentation than it was ours as a whole.

While I acknowledge a great number of people criticized us and our delivery, I believe that speech provided a good framework for the committee to move forward with in the future. Or, at the very least, it granted me the strength *I* needed to move forward, which is no small feat. I believe Kazuki feels the same way.

I don't believe that all the students of Hekiho feel the same as we do. However, what I *do* believe is that there are many who share in our struggles and sentiments, and many more who feel similarly and wish to empathize. So, as a matter of course, we've been receiving far more interviews and inquiries than ever—something that only further increases the workload the committee has to tackle. And of course, something that's similarly increasing is Kazuki's grumbling—she constantly shows signs of wanting to just pack up and leave the mountain of papers behind, and if it keeps up much longer, I fear I may have to step in.

Ah, yes—I'm sure you're wondering about Arimura and Ishiwata. As unfortunate as it is for me to say this, it did not work out between them. And while I did think they were a good match for each other... I'm afraid, somewhere in my heart, I always knew that it wasn't going to work out. That girl is simply too evasive for a boy to grab hold of her and force her to settle down—that's simply who she is. There's also the fact of the matter that she's been struggling with a great deal of inner turmoil as of late... but I don't believe for even a second that her decision was made for the wrong reasons.

She actually came over to Aoba for dinner yesterday. And there was one thing she said that left me quite perplexed... She said, "I turned down a real specimen today. I'm *definitely* gonna get on more boys' radars now," and if that weren't already bad enough, she had the biggest, most beaming smile you can think of on her face. My goodness, that girl... She can be quite the handful, as I'm sure you're aware.

Well, while I'm on the topic of potential romance, I would like to make it clear that Arimura has it all wrong about Masuda and myself. That boy is as a court jester to me—charming, entertaining, engaging, and abound with many friends and connections. For these reasons, he is a person I very much value having in my life. At one point in time, I scheduled a meal with him so I could ask him about the various opinions and other anecdotes he had heard from his fellow students—something that is well within my role as vice president of SBSAC. That is all that happened. But perhaps Arimura knows full well what my intentions are and simply wishes to tease me...

Takuru, I have some news to give you. They have finally selected a date for Itou to be transferred to a medical reformatory. It will be on December 30th.

I believe you were already aware that he was going to be transferred, but those of us who are assisting with further research into CCS were only officially informed today.

I am so, so sorry Takuru. We did everything we possibly could when giving our testimonies to the police—but no matter what we tried, the decision was not overturned. We've also been told that Itou accepted the sentence given to him.

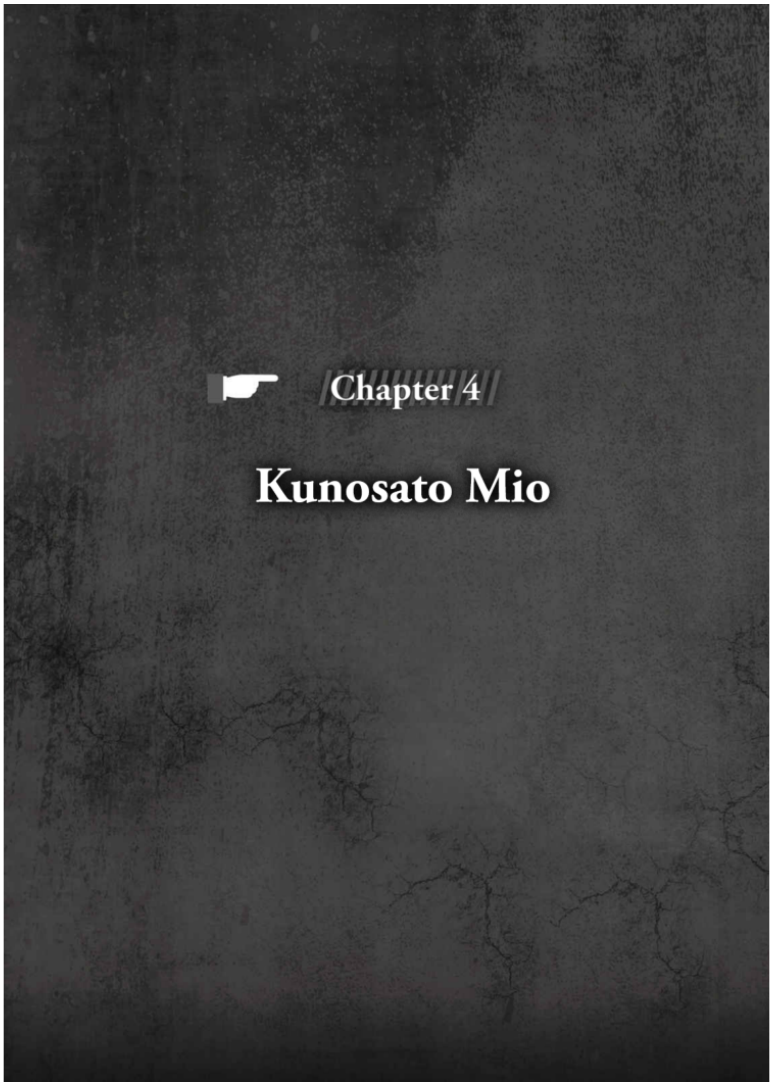
We knew that we desperately had to do something... and yet, in the end, we achieved nothing.

Words cannot describe how sorry I am, Takuru. I am so, so sorry. I know that you must be even more heartbroken than I am to hear this... but I know just as well that this was not something to be kept from you.

So please, no matter what may happen from this point forward, I ask from the bottom of my heart that you take care of yourself above all else.

Sincerely,

Minamisawa Senri


Chapter 4
Kunosato Mio

The moment the full breadth of the scene stretched out before her eyes, Mio realized there could only be one explanation: she was steeped deep within a dream.

It was a place she knew well; it was the Cognitive Science Laboratory that she had used to spend her days in back when she had lived in the United States. Several beds lined the sterile, nearly barren room; syringes, laryngoscopes, blood collection tubes, and all manner of other equipment decorated the top of a single silver tray; and the thick, inescapable smell of antiseptic permeated the room's entirety.

She was standing in the experimentation ward.

She knew it was a dream, but it didn't make any difference. A pained grimace rose to her face. Her heart began to palpitate violently. Sweat beaded and dripped from her face. She tried desperately to scream, but no matter how hard she tried, nothing came out; in all likelihood, there was only one single thing she wanted to say: *"Stop it!"* But she couldn't. She was paralyzed.

Overwhelmed with anguish, she clung to the bed as she felt the distinct sensation of tears dotting her cheeks. It was a feeling she had long since grown tired of this dream bringing.

Lying on the bed were a little girl and a little boy—two children she knew just as well as the room they lay within. The three of them had been good friends. They had spent more time together than they could recount; they would eat all their meals together, and they had even gone so far as to travel together—though that occasion had been restricted to only a single day. To Mio, a girl who had very few figures in her life whom she could call friends, those two children occupied a very special place in her heart.

Mio took the girl's hand, then leaned in close to examine her face. Her pupils were dilated, and they refused to sit still, whipping around every which way without any rhyme or reason. Mio was certain that, even though her own eyes were blurred with tears, the girl's likely could see even less—if she hadn't already lost her sight entirely.

A strange sound poured from the machine that monitored the girl's vitals. Her voice trembling, Mio cried out for the girl, begging her to stay with her. She begged herself to never wake up. But her pleas fell on deaf ears; instead, a stark, all-encompassing white began to overtake the world—just as it always did.

The girl's mouth opened.

"_____"

It was likely only one or two words, but even after all this time, Mio had never been granted the simple luxury of knowing what they were. And this time was no different. All that happened was the white taking over in its entirety, and the dream reached its end.

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C: Who are you?

K: The same as you.

C: What's that supposed to mean?

K: I'm a true believer of Miyashiro Takuru and Itou Shinji, just as you are.

C: Did you *investigate* me?

K: For someone who's supposedly so accustomed to this trade, you do a lousy job covering your own tracks. I would struggle to call what I did a proper investigation.

C: Are you going to report me?

K: Are you even reading my messages? I believe I've made it quite clear that it would be in our best interests to cooperate.

C: I don't believe you.

K: You don't have to believe me. If you were stupid enough to trust me so quickly, perhaps cooperating with you would be a poor course of action after all.

K: Now. The information you obtained is accurate.

C: What information?

K: I don't know the exact time it'll happen yet, but on December 30th, 2016, Itou Shinji will be transferred to the Kanto Medical Juvenile Training School.

C: How do you know that?

K: Even if I told you, how would you know I was telling the truth? Do you plan to investigate me? Because if you do, let me give you a word of advice: the people who you've been dealing with thus far are fucking small fry compared to me.

K: I'm almost certain your plan is going to fail, and at this rate, it will never even come to fruition with the paltry shit you've been doing.

C: I reject that.

K: A few anonymous threats over the phone and the couple little pipe bombs you threw together in your garage won't do jack shit. And even if they *were* enough to get things moving, you have nothing planned for after that. So I suggest you let me lend you a hand.

K: While the police are transporting Itou Shinji, we move in on the vehicle and seize it.

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Waking up atop her bed, Mio could feel a minor sense of discomfort on her chest.

“You little... How many times have I told you not to come in here unless I say so?” Mio said angrily, having realized exactly who it was who had invaded her space. However, all they said in return was a soft “meow” from beneath the covers. It was a single black cat.

The cat was a stray she had invited into her room a few times to serve as her only form of warmth after her space heater had broken down. She had gotten the heater fixed fairly recently, but even after that point, the cat would scratch and scratch at the window until Mio finally relented and let it in.

Mio was currently living in an apartment in Shibuya. The rent was certainly on the cheaper side, and thus the room was small, cramped, and decrepit. And while the place wouldn’t be especially unappealing if she made any effort to maintain it, she did not care if her room was a mess so long as it did not interfere with her daily activities. Clothes and documents that she had set aside for the time being had been cast all around the room, covering the floor nearly in its entirety.

Tearing away the shoddy bedding that often failed to stave off the cold, Mio grabbed hold of the cat by the scruff of its neck as it cried out in protest, tossed it lightly into the corner of the room, then headed for the bathroom.

Her head felt far heavier than usual. Was it because she had been speaking with someone until only a few hours prior? Or was it because she’d had such an unpleasant dream? Thinking it to be perhaps both, Mio turned the shower knob to hot.

In the mirror, despite it being fogged up by the steam, she could see the distinct carving of an old scar on her shoulder. It was a bite mark that had taken root deep in her flesh—though no one could tell it was such from a distance.

It had been inflicted on her by a girl she had cared very deeply for.

Trying and failing to recall the contents of her dream, Mio shook her head to shoo the thoughts away; she knew full well that she wouldn’t be able to remember it in its entirety, for she had already tried countless times in the past.

After exiting the bathroom, Mio checked her emails, several of the websites she herself ran, and the sites of a few major media outlets; once she finished doing that, it was time for her to leave her apartment.

“It’s Christmas Eve. If you’re in the mood to gorge yourself on some chicken, go to the park or downtown or something where everybody’s celebrating,” Mio said to the cat.

Landing on the fence across the street as if it had done it countless times before, the cat let out a single meow seemingly in approval and disappeared.

“It’s Christmas Eve.”

In less than a week, December 30th would come.

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AH Tokyo General Hospital, Yoyogi.

Residing in one of the general hospital's patient rooms, Mio examined the data displayed on the monitor in front of her for a moment, then gave her opinion. "I don't see an issue. There's going to be one more thorough examination done on him the day before the transfer, but it's likely just for the sake of it. I doubt anything will come of it," she said.

Detective Shinjo nodded, relieved.

The hospital room Mio was currently located in had been rented to her personally by the police, designating it for the pursuit of CCS research. The room was cleaned regularly by the nurses, so unlike Mio's apartment, it shined bright and clear—that was, except for the area around the desk where Mio had haphazardly cast her datasheets and various materials. Mio then noticed something that had not been there a few days prior: a small Christmas tree, sitting by the window. Perhaps it was something the hospital did once the season came around.

Mio returned her attention to the monitor; the data on it was of a young man she knew very well.

Itou Shinji.

Along with Miyashiro Takuru, he was considered by the public to be one of the perpetrators behind the Return of the New Generation Madness—with him having had a particular hand in the murder of a young girl: Tachibana Yui. Although the crimes were ones of extreme brutality, once it was brought to the court's attention that the boy had been instigated by Miyashiro while also suffering from CCS, the decision was made not to send him to jail, but to a juvenile medical reformatory instead.

The data Mio was overlooking had been obtained from a number of medical institutions, including AH Tokyo General itself; some of the charts even included projective psychological tests such as the Baum and Rorschach tests.

"At this rate, even if he is transferred to a reformatory, he'll be pulled right back out and taken to a research facility," Mio said with a sigh.

A complicated expression rose to Shinjo's face, and he peered at the monitor. "Is the data that problematic?"

"Being honest, I'm at a total loss. And I'm sure the various organizations looking into him are no different; the fact that they're doing rudimentary psychological tests at this point is more than enough proof of that. These tests are intended to be entirely subjective, with the results changing based on the observer, but the results make no sense. How many tests do you think I've read that not only conclude in the exact same way, but have the exact same scientific jargon?"

“As strange as that is, I want to put that aside for a moment and ask: How is he doing? Physically, I mean.”

“Have you gone to see him recently?”

Shinjo’s face darkened, and he hesitated to respond. “It’s been a long time since the last time I did. They’re not even letting his parents visit.” He sighed. “What I wouldn’t give to at least talk to the kid one more time before they transfer him...”

“Huh. I would’ve thought you’d have figured something out. Guess I was wrong.”

“Don’t be ridiculous—I’m already walking a ridiculously fine line as it is.”

Mio had known that Shinjo had been under an intense amount of pressure from the upper factions of the police force for quite some time. He was the one who had been most involved in the Return of New Gen case, and yet, once it had been solved, the management of said case had not been left with him, but with the police themselves—people Shinjo had never told the full extent of the truth behind the case to. As for why he never shared the full truth with them, it was because not only would it not help with the cleanup in any way, but it might do the exact opposite—causing unnecessary commotion while also kicking the hornet’s nest that lay beneath that very truth.

Perhaps having sensed these sentiments within the detective, the police department had gradually been distancing him further and further from the case, all while purposefully keeping things related to it from him. These practices had also been extended to Mio, whom Shinjo had always actively gone to for help; she, too, had not gotten to see Itou directly for quite some time. Despite having been granted her hospital room for research purposes, it was far from effective due to her being prevented from obtaining any form of data of her own. The detailed examination of Itou mentioned earlier would not be performed by her, either.

“I’m guessing you’re not the one in charge of transferring him?” Mio asked.

“I’m not. They told me about it, yes, but it was like telling me they had their hand in the cookie jar after having already eaten several. Someone from another department will be handling it... though I suppose being given at least *some* notice is better than nothing at all,” Shinjo said with a scoff. Although he may have been smiling, his voice was laden with sorrow; he was likely deeply ashamed of his helplessness.

I was right—Shinjo isn’t in charge of transporting him, Mio thought to herself, before grumbling under her breath, “Guess there’s only so much he can do...”

Turning to him, Mio asked aloud, “What time do you work until today, Shinjo?”

“Huh? Why do you ask?”

“It’s Christmas Eve, and I know you don’t have anyone to spend it with. So I’ll let you buy me a drink.”

The detective gaped at her. “I’m sorry, what? You sure you’re not *already*

wasted? Also, *hey*! Shouldn't you at least *ask* first before deciding I don't have someone to spend Christmas Eve with?"

"Do you?"

Shinjo fell silent. After a moment of awkward silence, he replied bashfully, "Just don't expect top shelf..."

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"All right, we'll have two of the strip steak, two of the tripe, and two of the grilled heart skewers. We'll also take three orders of veggies, some chanja, and a bowl of cold noodles."

"Sounds good. We also have a Christmas special running today—fresh oyakodon at a pretty big discount."

"Oh, great. We'll take an order of that too, then. Also, if I could get a refill on my oolong tea?"

With a nod of affirmation, Mio watched the waiter leave before turning her eyes to Shinjo, who was sitting across from her.

"What?" she said.

"You know, you could at least try and take it a *little* bit easy on my wal— You know what? Just forget it," Shinjo grumbled.

It had already been an hour since they had entered the yakiniku restaurant in Yoyogi that they had decided on. It was a peculiar little spot—it wasn't one students would regularly frequent, nor was it a place for those seeking authentic ethnic food. And not only that, but despite the fact that it was the weekend—and Christmas Eve, at that—there were no couples to be seen, only a large array of exhausted businessmen stopping by on their way home from work.

Mio continued to wolf down anything and everything the waiter brought her that she could get her hands on; Shinjo, meanwhile, had yet to even lift his chopsticks—all he had been doing was drinking.

He turned to Mio. "So?" he said in an irritated voice.

"What? Stop staring at me and eat," she said back.

"*So*, what do you need from me?"

Mio's chopsticks halted with a *clack*. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not an idiot. You wouldn't have invited me out to dinner for the first time ever if you didn't need something."

"That's what you think of me? I'm hurt. Wounded, even," Mio said with a smirk. It was indeed true that this was the first time she had ever gone out to eat with Shinjo.

Rolling his eyes at this idiocy, Shinjo took a swig of his beer. He must have had

quite a bit to drink by that point, yet there wasn't even a tinge of blush on his face; his tolerance must have been quite a bit higher than his appearance let on. "No, that's who I *know* you are," he said.

"Hm. Well, fine..." Before finishing her sentence, Mio returned to eating, choosing both deliberately and with no hesitation to swipe a few of the strips of meat that Shinjo had been delicately preparing for himself. "The truth is, I've run into a bit of trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"The jobs at Momose's only come by once in a blue moon, and they pay by the job. And expenses have been piling up. In other words, I'm flat broke."

"Don't eat one more damn bite!" Shinjo yelped, reaching out frantically to stop her chopsticks atop the grill with his own. Clicking her tongue, Mio pivoted to reaching for the cold noodles instead.

Shinjo sighed in exasperation. "Well, I *was* going to ask if you had something in mind to give me in return for the food..."

Mio scoffed. "What kind of charity do you think I'm running here? Oh, actually, when the waiter comes by, could you get us two orders of beef shanks, pork necks, and scallions? Then some oolong tea to wash it down."

"You're not ordering one more goddamn thing!" he yelped. "Where are you even putting all this?!"

"I developed a second stomach for when someone else is footing the bill back in the U.S."

"Yeah, and you wonder why you don't have a date for Christmas Eve..."

"I wouldn't be talking if I were you."

As Mio took a sip of the oolong tea that had been brought to her, Shinjo shook his head, and with a, "Whatever... Just do what you want," he stood up from his seat and made for the restroom.

The very moment he disappeared inside the other room, Mio moved. Opening Shinjo's bag, she booted up the tablet that was inside and inserted an SD card into it. She then typed in the password she had deciphered, and with that, the tablet opened without a hitch and began copying data over to the SD card.

"Sorry, Shinjo."

Murmuring an apology that would never reach him, Mio then pressed a single key.

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K: The time the transport departs will be shortly after 10:00 AM. Upon leaving AH, it will take the expressway before arriving at Kanto Medical in Fuchu at approximately 11:00 AM. This time was likely chosen to avoid rush hour

traffic.

C: Why do you know all this?

K: Trade secret.

C: You insane bastard... Did you hack into the police database?

K: I'll send you a photo of the vehicle and its plates for later usage. Including the driver, there'll be four officers in charge of the transfer. The vehicle won't be traveling with an entourage, but this is already an abnormally high amount of security to transport a criminal whose crime happened over a year ago.

C: That just goes to show how glorious Itou truly is... We have to rescue him.

K: The materials for the bomb will arrive at your location tomorrow. Assembly instructions will be included inside.

C: I'm sorry, what? How did you get my address?

K: As I said before, you do a lousy job covering your own tracks.

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December 25th. Christmas Day.

Upon finishing her work at the hospital, Mio headed back to Freesia Credit Bureau—the locale that served as her official workplace—only to find an unexpected guest waiting for her there.

“My apologies for dropping in unannounced...”

It was Minamisawa Senri; she was chatting with Momose, the woman who served as the president of Freesia. Two cups of coffee sat on the table in front of the sofa where the two were stationed.

Mio’s expression stiffened at the sight of a person she had a fair bit of difficulty dealing with. “What are you doing here?” she grumbled.

Momose was the one to answer. “Oh, Mimi, dear, it’s the sweetest thing—it’s Christmas Day, and look who decided to bring us a few wonderful little treats to celebrate? Here, sit down and have a few!” She smiled in a somewhat teasing fashion; in all likelihood, she was well aware that Mio did not get along very well with the girl that was beside her.

The box on the table was lined with miniature cakes that looked to be on the pricier end. Mio did not have a cup of coffee herself, so Momose opted to get up to make her some.

After a few moments passed, Mio decided to relent and sat down on the sofa.

“You see, Senri here’s been on pins and needles waiting for you, hon,” Momose said from across the room.

Senri gave a small nod, affirming what Momose had said. Growing even stiffer than before, without missing a beat, Mio popped her neck loudly as if to urge the girl to hurry up and get on with it. “What do you want?” she said to her.

“I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, that’s all,” Senri said. “I also wanted to thank both you and Momose for assisting Yuto with his schoolwork when you’ve had the time. It’s been a great help to him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve hardly done anything.”

A soft smirk rose to Senri’s face. “Yuto sure doesn’t think so.”

Mio clicked her tongue.

Yuto had started showing up at Freesia every now and then shortly after he and the rest of Aoba had completed their rehabilitation at AH Tokyo General Hospital. Mio still had no idea what exactly had triggered this boy’s sudden interest. While she had known him from back when the case had still been happening, she had never had a true conversation with him; even after the case had concluded, she couldn’t recall having had any in-depth chats with the boy. The only thing worth mentioning was that, during his and the many other people related to Miyashiro’s rehabilitation, Mio had spent a great deal of time with them in her efforts to study CCS.

Searching her memories, she recalled that it was then she had learned that Yuto wanted to be a lawyer. Among the personal effects he and the other patients requested the nurses bring to them, Mio distinctly remembered coming across a book about lawyership. But she did not remember this simply because of that happenstance—she remembered because she had thought the book to be a very poor reference for the boy and proceeded to recommend him a better alternative. That was as far as their interactions went, however. And yet, despite this seeming lack of connection, Yuto visited Freesia very often. On a normal day, he would go to the library with his friends, but the moment he came across something he did not understand, or if he had a question no one else could answer, he came straight to Mio.

“Mimi’s never exactly been great with kids, you see,” Momose said with amusement as she brought over the coffee.

“Really? Could’ve fooled me,” Senri said, her eyes going wide.

“*Momose. You better quit while you’re ahead*,” Mio said, enunciating her every word.

Unfortunately for her, Momose simply let this glare pass her by and gleefully continued. “Oh, relax, hon,” she said. “Now, you’re never gonna believe this, but back when she was in the States, she used to look after kids all the time! She wasn’t a babysitter or anything, though—she was just a researcher doing her job. The kids she looked after were even younger than Yuto, actually. And she had a whole host of them at her disposal.”

“You know? I can see that,” Senri said, nodding to herself with a smile.

Sullen, Mio turned away from the two girls and sipped her coffee.

“Yuto likes to say that Ms. Kunosato is like a homeroom teacher to him,” Senri said, and Momose immediately burst out laughing.

“Lord, am I glad she’s not *my* teacher! I’d go home in tears from that mouth on her!”

“All right, change the damn subject already,” Mio said, having had enough.

Senri shone a soft smile, but then, she leaned forward ever so slightly. Her tone turned serious. “I believe it was a few days ago when Yuto visited last,” she said. “When he was here, you told him about Itou getting transferred, didn’t you?”

Mio jumped slightly, and her eyes snapped back to Senri. Then, her gaze fell to the floor. “Yeah,” she admitted.

“Well, that’s the other reason I’m here: I wanted to thank you for that. I was planning on telling him as soon as I learned about it, but in all honesty... that takes a great deal of courage to do—courage I’m afraid I don’t have. So thank you, Ms. Kunosato.”

Mio stared at Senri. Refusing to take her eyes off of her, she poked and prodded in an attempt to gauge exactly what the girl was feeling; there was no way she wasn’t being sarcastic. She thought for absolute certain that there had to be at least *some* visible snark on her face, and yet, in the end, all she came to find was a genuine thankfulness for her doing what she herself had not been able to.

Growing uncomfortable once again, Mio squirmed where she stood.

“Did he say anything when you told him?” Senri asked. Her voice showed a deep amount of concern for her little brother; this was the side of her that Mio had the most amount of trouble dealing with.

Why’s she interrogating me like this? What’s got her so anxious? Mio wondered, but the answer was obvious: Yuto himself. He was family to her, and whenever that fact was presented to Mio, she often found herself feeling fairly uncomfortable.

When Mio did not answer her question, Senri, perhaps perceiving her silence *as* an answer, began to press harder. “He did, didn’t he?” she said. “What did he say?”

Mio recalled the expression on Yuto’s face from a few days ago. Regardless of what the truth of the circumstances was, the person who had killed his sister with their own two hands was going far, far away. She remembered exactly what the look on his face had been when she had told him that. The exact sentence that had immediately come from his mouth.

Mio hesitated, but eventually, she managed to squeeze out an answer. “Nothing. He didn’t say anything.”

Senri fell silent. For a short while, that silence lingered in the air; perhaps Senri believed she could wait it out to get a different answer. But when it became clear

that wasn't the case, she gave a swift, "I see," and did not pursue the matter further.

Senri left Freesia shortly after. Once she saw the door close behind her, Mio attempted to get some work done. However, no matter how hard she tried, she failed to make any meaningful progress—for all she could think about were Senri and Yuto. Their faces flickered in her mind without end; every time she snapped out of it and realized her work had come to a halt because of them, she would click her tongue and start working again—only for the process to repeat itself.

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Arriving home, Mio turned on the light only to see a familiar cat scratching at the outside of the window; it must have been waiting for her. On any other day, Mio would go over and open the window for it—but for some reason not even she herself knew, she simply stood there in the center of the room, listening to the sound of the cat's claws scratching against the glass.

There really had been no reason for her to have lied to Senri about Yuto. When she had told him the news, he had responded with a single, incredibly soft murmur—a murmur that, ever since she had heard it, had rendered her almost unable to sleep. She was now faced with a very vexing problem—and while Senri had no way of knowing what exactly that problem was, Mio could have at the very least told her what he had said to her.

The sheer worry on Senri's face flashed through her mind once again. "Pain in my ass..." she grumbled to herself.

The look in Senri's eyes back then had been that of a mama bear's; in that moment, she was like the perfect loving, protective guardian that was often depicted in movies and novels made manifest. It was a look that shone with so much love and care, it was almost hard to comprehend—and it was a look she had never even come close to seeing from her own mother or father.

It had been several years since Mio's estrangement from her parents. It had not been an especially intense or torrential parting, but even so, they had not spoken at all since. She did not even know if they were alive or dead. But this was not especially new; even before they had severed their relationship, they had never shown much in the way of care toward each other.

If she remembered correctly, she had been in the U.S. when she had very succinctly, and very definitively, voiced her desire to cut contact with them. It had been during a day trip she had taken to visit the hometown of one of her labmates, and she had delivered the message over the phone.

The scratching at her window grew louder. Realizing just how deep in thought she had fallen, Mio finally snapped out of it. She sighed to herself; her run-in with Senri had really gotten to her.

Sliding the window open, the cat leapt into the room with a petulant fervor that almost seemed to say, "Took you long enough," before brazenly beginning to meow for food. Opening the tuna sandwich package she had bought for dinner,

Mio took the tuna out from the middle and threw it to the repeat intruder. The incessant meowing then came to an end, and without displaying much in the way of gratitude, the intruder proceeded to help itself.

The silence weighing heavily, Mio touched her hand to the wound on her shoulder through her clothes.

“_____”

The girl had only said a word or two. And yet, even after all this time, Mio still could not remember them.

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K: One day left until the operation. Is everything ready on your end?

C: Obviously.

C: What about you? Have you decided on how the call will play out?

K: After we activate it, call the following number from the cell phone I sent to you: 090-XXXX-XXXX.

C: And whose number is that?

K: The person who'll be driving the van. You have to immediately tell him to call off the transport in a way that'll make him take it entirely seriously. We can't let him think it's a prank. Tell him you planted a bomb in the car and tell him exactly how it's installed. He'll listen to you then.

C: Then what?

K: Tell them to call a detective by the name of Shinjo and get him to come to their current location immediately.

C: Who is that and why do we need him there?

K: He's the cancer at the root of everything. He was effectively in charge of the entire investigation. In other words, he's the one who put both Miyashiro and Itou behind bars.

C: Are you serious?

K: Dead serious. And I refuse to let that son of a bitch get away with it.

C: Well, now that I know that, I have no intention of doing that either. And you're sure it's him?

K: Very sure. As soon as we rescue Itou, I'll make sure he

gets what's coming to him.

C: Will you kill him?

K: You're damn right I will. Don't you want him dead too?

C: Are you crazy? Of course I do.

K: Good. Now, once you've got the driver on the phone, keep him on the line until Shinjo arrives. Feel free to tell him all about what that fucking pig did.

K: I'll take care of everything else.

C: Done. But I want you to tell me something first.

K: What?

C: Why do all this? Why go so far?

C: Explain it to me.

C: Wait a second... Can you... see?

K: It's like I told you at the very start. I'm an ardent true believer of Miyashiro Takuru and Itou Shinji.

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December 30th.

“Good morning, Ms. Kunosato.”

Carrying a bag of writing materials he had diligently brought, Yuto arrived at the Freesia building shortly after 9:00 AM, just as Mio had instructed.

“What’s in the bag?” Mio said, pointing at it.

“Uh... Notebooks... and pens and stuff...?” Yuto answered with a blank stare on his face.

“Did someone tell you to bring those?”

“I mean, we’re going to study, so I kind of need them.”

The matter-of-factness of how he’d said that left Mio at a loss for words.

Momose let out a chuckle. “You called him over here, silly girl. What did you expect?” she said.

Mio scratched the back of her head in embarrassment. Then, with a sigh, she said, “I *guess* I can make some time to help you. Since you’re already here and all.”

Having received the go-ahead, Yuto spread out his materials across the table that Mio often worked on. Every now and then as he worked, Yuto would politely speak up to ask a question, and Mio would answer. He was in the phase of his life in which he was learning basic academic skills, and due in part to the great

chemistry between him and Mio, he was picking up everything she taught him very well. The two were especially adept at Science and English, with her being able to challenge him with particularly advanced content; when it came to the other subjects, however, the content was strictly at a middle school level, meaning Mio simply answered his questions without much thought.

It was a very casual relationship. Where they currently stood, even if something incredibly grave happened to Yuto—even if he were to *die*—Mio couldn't see herself being able to show that same face that Senri had shown before. And yet, here she was planning to do something incredibly, incredibly foolish for his sake in spite of that.

Knowing this, Mio simply sat there with a perturbed frown on her face and waited for the specified time.

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10 AM.

Taking care not to disturb Yuto as he continued to concentrate on his work, Mio halted her own efforts and left the building. Stopping at the entrance, she decided to take a few minutes to take a phone call. She had initially planned to continue calling and calling until the other person answered, but surprisingly enough, the person picked up on the very first attempt. "I'm busy right now. I'll call you back," they tried to say, but Mio cut them off before they could finish.

"Did the person in charge of the transfer contact you?"

Mio could hear the sound of Shinjo's breath catching through the phone. "What are you talking about?" he said. He was clearly irritated, but Mio opted to ignore that.

"They did."

The other end was silent for a moment. "Yeah."

"The animosity they've got for you is obvious—hell, I can still feel the hatred over the phone. But until they know for sure that you have an idea who's behind all this, they'll temporarily be forced to wait for your orders."

"Okay, what? Could you stop screwing with me for once in your life and tell me what's going—"

"Itou's safety is the number-one priority. Tell them to send him to Freesia."

"I want answers first. What's going on?"

"There's no time. Just tell—"

SLAM!

A loud sound burst into Mio's eardrums; Shinjo must have punched something over on his end of the line.

"I *SAID* I want answers! Tell me what's going on, NOW!"

Mio's mouth fell agape. It had been a very long time since someone had shouted at her; in truth, it was a welcome change of pace.

"It won't take long for them to figure out there's no bomb in the transfer vehicle and that the smoke coming from behind the vending machines by the police station and AH is a diversion. From there, it'll take them less than an hour to catch the conspirators once they start trying to track their phones. Once that happens, and the chain of command takes a breath, it's over. Let me say it again: *there's no time*. So if you have any interest in making a difference, use the time you *do* have to hurry the hell up and get his ass to Freesia."

Without waiting for a reply, Mio hung up and shut her phone off completely. Heading back inside the office, Mio waited for Yuto to finish the sentence he was currently writing. Then, the moment she saw he was done, she cut through the silence. "Pencils down."

Yuto looked up at her with a blank stare. "Huh?"

"You'll have a guest soon."

"Wait, a guest? Huh?"

Mio nodded.

Senri's face flashed in Mio's mind. Muttering under her breath about how out of character this was for her, she explained herself. "Remember when I told you the other day that Itou was going to be transferred? And then you told me how you wished you could see him just one more time?"

Yuto's expression immediately changed.

"If you had the opportunity to do just that, what would you do?" Mio said. She stayed silent for a moment to give him a chance to answer her, but he was at a loss for words.

"Would there be something you'd want to say to him?" she continued. "Or... would you want to kill him?"

"*Why would I ever want that...?!*" Yuto shouted, shooting up from his chair.

Over the past several months, Mio had been coming to know just how mature Yuto was for his age; but in that moment, when faced with the words she had just said, the young boy's eyes swam with tears, and his entire body trembled and shook—as if he were nothing more than the child that he was.

"Well, whatever you want to do, you better make it quick."

Then, as if on cue, the doorbell rang. Yuto's eyes shot open as if he had just been punched in the stomach.

"What on earth have you done now, Mio?" Momose said, astonished. Mio bowed her head to her in apology, leaving her to simply throw her hands up with a, "Why do I even bother?" She then went to answer the door—however, rather than using the intercom, she simply spoke directly through the door. "Who is it?"

“This is the police. Open the door.”

Momose looked to Mio for confirmation that this was her doing, and she gave a short nod. “All right, you got it,” said Momose.

Opening the door, Momose was faced with two men in suits. Then, without even so much as showing their badges, they took a step inside the office. “Excuse the disturbance. We are—”

“Some of Detective Shinjo’s coworkers, I presume?” she interrupted, causing the officer to choke on his words. “What can we do for you?”

Mio smiled as she reveled in Momose beating them to the punch. Although she might look like your everyday, unassuming middle-aged lady, she was quite the cunning woman when she had to be. This contrast between her appearance and her actual demeanor immediately granted her the advantage over the officer. Here, in this room—in this building—she was the predator, and these men her prey.

The man seemed to be at a loss for words, having been forced to abandon his script; eventually, he managed to choke out the words, “P-Please let us stay in your office for a little while. I know this is a very strange ask, but we’re transporting a boy to another location, and we’re all—”

“Fine by me. Make yourselves at home,” she interrupted once more. Stepping aside to make way for the two officers, she gestured toward the inside of the office. The stunned looks on their faces were palpable.

“A-Are you sure? You didn’t even let me finish,” one stammered.

“Did I stutter, young man? Now get your tushes inside—it’s freezing out there.”

“Th-Thank you, ma’am! But, uh... before we come in, I should warn you—”

“As long as you ensure there won’t be any complications, I don’t care what you do. Hold a bar mitzvah for all I care—Lord knows it would liven this place up. Just don’t make me regret this.”

Complications, in this regard, meant any kind of harm coming to her and the others; she wanted the officer to ensure their safety. The officer was clearly dumbfounded, and when he didn’t answer immediately, Momose gave him a strong look demanding he do so.

Snapping out of it, the officer stuttered out a weak, “Y-Yes, ma’am,” bowed his head as if he were a subordinate of hers, then entered the office fully along with his fellow officer.

As the men briefly inspected the entirety of the interior—including the restroom—Mio leaned back against the wall, unable to do much of anything else. Keeping his eyes pointed squarely at the floor, Yuto did the same; it was only then that Mio realized that was where he had moved to now that he had stood up from his chair.

After no longer than a few minutes, the officer grabbed hold of his two-way radio and spoke into it. Then, the muffled sound of a car door being closed

outside could be heard. Yuto immediately froze in place.

A few moments of complete silence passed, and then, the door to Freesia opened once more, and two men stepped inside the room.

And between the two men was a single boy.

Itou.

He was dressed in a simple sweatshirt and a light jacket—the type one would typically wear around the holidays; in all likelihood, it had been provided to him by the police. He was clearly a bit haggard, but he seemed to have recovered quite substantially from the incident. He also looked fairly neat and clean; perhaps he had gotten the opportunity to shower prior to the transfer.

“Huh...?” Itou stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes went wide.

Mio stepped in front of him. “Long time no see,” she said.

The two men regarded her suspiciously, but Momose immediately stepped in. “I’m sure you two gentlemen have heard from Detective Shinjo that there is a woman assigned to Mr. Itou’s case—a CCS researcher. This is her.”

Mio looked at him closely, inspecting him. But the boy said nothing.

“I assume there’s been no issues since the last time I saw you?” she said.

Without looking at her, Itou gave a small, wordless nod. But this wasn’t because he was disregarding her—it was because his gaze was focused solely on one person.

Yuto.

Neither of the boys moved a muscle. Following Itou’s gaze, Mio saw that Yuto was still standing there, staring at the floor. He had yet to look up even once.

It was the first time they had seen each other since that horrid night. Even among those who knew the truth behind the Return of New Gen, the only people who had seen Itou since that night were Mio, whom he was providing research data to, and Shinjo, who was investigating the case.

Seeing Itou’s sudden downtrodden state, the two men immediately shot suspicious looks at Yuto. Even still, Yuto did not move.

It would have taken very little effort for Mio to simply break the silence and force the boy to act, but in the end, she could not bring herself to do so. Instead, she turned to face him. Walking up to the boy, Mio then placed her hand on his left shoulder. Still, the boy said nothing.

A small sniffle. Then, wordlessly, the boy reached his hand up to hers and squeezed it. He was trembling. Mio looked at him; tears were trickling down his face, forming dark spots on his clothes where they landed.

One could only imagine what he was feeling. Resentment; deep, crushing despair; or perhaps an incredible rage that eclipsed both of those things. Any and all of these emotions would’ve been entirely within his right to feel. His sister,

Tachibana Yui, could not have been more important to him. She had been an irreplaceable treasure, and his only blood sibling. And she had been taken away from him by the very boy that stood in front of him.

According to Senri, when Yuto had first arrived at Aoba Dormitory, he would never let go of his sister's hand. The two had been attached at the hip; even while he slept, she never left his side. After the Shibuya Earthquake, Yui could no longer bring herself to be around anyone of the opposite sex—that was, except for Yuto. The two had been unrelenting beacons of support for one another; they had been each other's security blankets. They were a family, in the truest sense of the word.

Mio understood very well that she had no place in this—that there was nothing she could truly do for Yuto. However, as she felt the warmth of his hand atop hers, a thought came to mind: it had been *her* who had orchestrated this meeting. And then, she thought once more about how this wasn't like her. How out of character it was.

In that moment, Mio resented that she wasn't the type to carry around a handkerchief. With no other option left to her, she wiped away Yuto's tears with her fingertips.

"There's something you want to say to him, isn't there?" she said softly.

After a few moments, Yuto slowly nodded his head. Gently moving Mio's hand off his shoulder, he wiped away his tears with his sleeve. Then, he finally looked up from the floor.

"He needs to know... it's not his fault," he said. "And that... I know my brother feels the same way."

Seeing the expression on Yuto's face, Mio found herself robbed of not only words, but her ability to even move. The sight captivated her. With focus direct, and eyes resolute, it was as if this small boy was somehow more mature than anyone else in that entire room.

It was like he was an adult.

Wiping his face once more, Yuto moved away from the wall all on his own and began to walk toward Itou. His gait was steady, clear, and stable.

Only when he was standing directly in front of him did he stop.

“Itou.”

Itou hesitated for a moment. “Yuto.”

It was more akin to a low moan than anything else. He could not keep eye contact; his face simply fell to the floor, unable to bring himself to look at the boy in front of him.

And then, something happened—something that caused Mio’s eyes to shoot wide open.

Yuto had leapt into Itou’s chest and wrapped his arms around him.

He was hugging him.

Squeezing Itou as hard as he could, the sound of Yuto’s muffled sobs could be heard coming from his chest.

“*Gh...*” Itou’s face twisted, and he fell to his knees with Yuto’s arms still around him. Wrapping his arms around him in turn, a sea of tears began to fall from his face too. “I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...” he choked out.

Yuto shook his head again and again as he pressed it against Itou’s shoulder. Mio could not see his face, but she could see him trembling. He was crying his heart out.

“No, I... Itou, *I’m* sorry... I’m so, so sorry... For everything...” he said. The tears streaming down his face could be heard in his every word.

Itou’s arms squeezed the boy with every ounce of strength he could muster, all while he, too, shook his head violently; his face nuzzled Yuto’s as he moved it back and forth.

Not a single other person could move as they watched the two boys embrace each other. Even now, Mio still couldn’t take her eyes off of Yuto.

After several moments of them embracing each other passed, Yuto managed to squeeze out just a few more words. In a voice as loud as he could muster, he said, “Thank you... Thank you... so much, Itou...”

Suddenly, Mio’s vision flickered. She could still hear the sound of Itou wailing —but for some reason unknown to her, it was as if it were coming from a million miles away.

Unable to fight it, everything before Mio turned white.

It was the scene from her dreams. A scene from back from her time in the U.S. A scene from back when she had been performing experiments on two small children.

Just as she always did, the little girl opened her mouth. But this time...

“Thank you.”

The sound of Yuto’s and Itou’s teary voices was drowned out by the girl.

By two simple words.

A stream of tears trickled down Mio's face—tears that had come to her so naturally, she didn't even notice they were there.

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The moment Mio opened her door, the next thing she knew, she was being grabbed by her shirt collar.

"Why the hell didn't you say anything to me?!"

It was night. Shortly after Mio had returned home that day, the doorbell had begun to ring repeatedly. Without asking the person to identify themselves, she immediately opened the door—she knew exactly who it would be, after all.

She had never seen Shinjo so angry. Knowing she didn't have the strength to tear his hands away, Mio simply let him continue.

"I can't believe I waited so long to say this, but I'm sick and tired of you thinking you can do whatever you w—"

Shinjo's verbal assault stopped dead in its tracks. Mio tried to look down at the floor, but due to the fist gripping her shirt, she was unable to.

Shinjo's grip lessened somewhat. "What's going on?" he said, his tone softening.

"Nothing..." Even though she knew it was pointless to hide what was going on, Mio tried to do so anyway; but her voice lacked any kind of strength behind it. Even if she had been able to put on a convincing act, she already knew that her eyes, swollen as they were from sobbing and sobbing, as well as the state of the room behind her, were dead giveaways.

Letting her go, Shinjo then walked inside her apartment. On any normal day, Mio would have made a pointed jab about how he was entering a woman's home without permission, but in that moment, she was feeling too low to do even that. Instead, she silently walked farther into her room; closing the door behind him, Shinjo followed behind her without saying a word. The cat paced around restlessly, likely alarmed by the intruder it hadn't seen before.

"You have a *cat*?" Shinjo said incredulously.

With those concerned words, Mio was finally able to feel something other than sadness. A wry smile rose to her face, and with a few light slaps of her cheeks, she switched from her old mood to an entirely serious one—even if her face did still look like a mess. Regardless, she turned to Shinjo.

"I don't '*have*' it—it's just here," she said curtly. "Is that really why you're here? To ask about some stupid cat?"

Shinjo was dumbfounded; then, after cycling through a number of expressions that seemed to convey every possible emotion, he eventually let out a sigh of resignation. "The perp who made the bomb threat—not that there was any real threat considering the actual bomb he planted was *completely* botched—has been

arrested," he said.

Good to know, Mio conveyed with a nod, and the room returned to silence once again. Shinjo seemed unsatisfied with this, and before long, he couldn't take it anymore.

"Do you... not have any questions or anything?" he said.

"I don't really care. Besides, you're the one who came to me. I'm off duty."

A long sigh escaped from Shinjo, and with that, he went on to give the details anyway. "The perp was an underage boy living in Yokohama. He made a full confession—but he also claimed he had an accomplice," he reported. "The two communicated only via chatroom, and the boy testified that his accomplice's username was only a single letter: 'K.' However, when we inspected his computer that we seized, we found no such logs."

Damn right, Mio said inside her head. She had asked a certain "super hacker" that she knew to erase all possible evidence on the boy's computer, but as always, she had no idea how he had done so. Regardless, Mio was very impressed with the results; she could never have fooled the police on her own.

"The boy said that everything was instigated by this K," Shinjo said. "So, I ask you again: *Why the hell didn't you say anything to me?!*"

"You think *I'm* this 'K'? And what evidence do you have backing this?" Mio demanded.

"Gee, I don't know—how about your *direct call to me*?"

"Let me rephrase: Where's your *court-admissible* evidence?"

"You're not gonna tell me anything, then."

"You caught the guy. What's the issue?"

The day after the date for Itou's transfer had been set, Mio had discovered that an incredibly foolish young man—"C"—had been planning to do something incredibly dangerous: he had been preparing to disrupt Itou's transport. Mio had learned this when she'd accessed a certain website that C had been utilizing. Through this site, she discovered that the boy was planning to plant a bomb in order to save Itou from the police—a plan that was obviously doomed to fail. Every facet of it could only have been dreamt up by an amateur.

Initially, she had meant to report the boy's plans to Shinjo when she found out—that was, until she thought about it. Itou was an incredibly important research subject to her, and she could not afford to lose him. There was also the matter of Yuto.

In order to meet her goals, it had been necessary to force Shinjo to intervene in the transport from an official standpoint. In the meantime, Mio had sent materials to the boy in order for him to unknowingly modify the bomb into a non-lethal device—something that was especially expensive. She did not tell any of this to Shinjo, however, as she knew for a fact he would've opposed it.

Shinjo looked at her. “Did you do it for the kid...?” he asked.

“Who can say...?” Mio murmured. “Oh, yeah—there actually is one thing I want to ask: Itou’s transfer went smoothly, correct?”

“Yeah. Without a hitch—since K and co. didn’t end up doing anything.”

Mio gave a sarcastic shrug of the shoulders.

No longer able to be surprised anymore, Shinjo simply threw his hands in the air and headed for the door in a huff. Without turning around, however, just before he left, he had one more thing left to say. “I suppose it’s true that, considering the position Itou’s in, Yuto likely won’t be able to visit him without facing significant hurdles. But that shouldn’t last forever. Once enough time passes, he would more than likely have been able to see him. You really didn’t have to do all this,” he said. Then, after hesitating for a moment, he gave her one final parting remark. “You should really learn to trust others a bit more,” he said, before closing the door behind him.

A looming, depressive silence blanketed the room, and a fierce chill blew through it in the wake of the door’s closing. Unable to do even a single thing more, Mio, completely exhausted of all remaining energy, collapsed onto her bed.

“Trust me, I have been...” she murmured.

Shinjo was correct: even if Itou had gone through the process of transferring to the medical reformatory, then a series of other transfers to various research institutions, Yuto would have eventually been able to visit him somewhere down along the line—provided he followed all the formal procedures. Mio knew very well how rash it was to have carried out such a reckless plan to brute-force a visit—but to her, it had been necessary. For she’d wanted to grant Yuto’s wish as soon as possible.

Yuto was different from the children she had known in the U.S—something Mio had come to know very intimately. Not only were they far apart in age, but even their heights differed radically. If she had to give a particular reason as to why she felt the way she did—why she’d done what she’d done—it would be that she had wanted to see how he would respond. What would Yuto, a boy who had lost someone irreplaceable to him, say to the person who had taken them away? What thoughts would run through his mind? What words would he express? And what actions would he take? These were all things Mio wanted to know more than anything.

“‘Thank you’...” she murmured to herself. She fought as best she could to bite back the tears that were sure to come again if she didn’t hold them down.

Yuto knew the truth behind what had happened to his sister. He knew that Itou had not taken Yui’s life by his own will. But no matter how strong he was—no matter how much life had put him through—Yuto was still just a child. No one could’ve blamed him if the truth simply wasn’t enough for him—if the feelings raging inside him couldn’t be quelled by such an explanation. And yet, even so, he had faced the person who had taken everything from him... and said those two words. Words that had made Mio’s vision go white.

Back during her time in the U.S., she'd experimented on a young girl by the name of Beth. Beth was a bit of a brat, and she certainly had an attitude. Just like Mio, she was ostracized from her parents. Having lost her home, she'd drifted around for a while before eventually ending up at Mio's laboratory. However, one day, tragedy struck, and her life was taken during an experiment—an experiment who none other than Mio had performed.

In the last moments before she passed away, she said only two words.

"Thank you."

She had said thank you. To the person who had taken everything from her.

"Thank you."

"Damn it...!" Wiping away the tears streaming down her face, Mio's eyes drifted over to the clock. It was only then that she realized: the date had already changed.

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December 31st. New Year's Eve.

It was the final day of the year—a fact that left Mio with an onslaught of thoughts about what exactly she should do once the next one began.

"Hm. Well, all right. If that's what you've decided, then I'll support you, Mimi dear."

"You don't sound very surprised."

"Well, I knew it had to happen sooner or later."

When Mio told Momose about the decision she had come to—a decision she had been sure would be a surprise to her considering how out of the blue it was—she hardly even blinked. This was actually a common theme with the woman: no matter what happened, she never really seemed to be affected by anything—a facet of her that Mio couldn't help but feel somewhat suspicious of.

"Momose? Do you know about my past somehow? About what I did back in the U.S.?" Mio asked her.

"I get around, sweet pea. Isn't that the reason why you came to me in the first place?"

Mio went quiet; she couldn't help but feel that the Freesia president was deliberately avoiding answering her question. She considered pressing her further on this, but after thinking about it for a few moments, Mio eventually decided to shrug it off; it would have to be something she'd confirm for herself directly.

"I won't bother packing—what I'm wearing now is enough. If I need anything else, I'll let you know so you can send it over once I'm there."

"Fine by me. And let me handle the shipping costs—I wouldn't want to scare off one of my best sources with such poor hospitality, after all."

Bowing her head strongly, Mio expressed her utmost thanks to Momose. Freesia, and by extension, Momose had both done a great deal for her; it was largely due to her energy and general way of operating that Mio had been able to accomplish so much. Comparatively speaking, she had effectively been free to do as she pleased—something she was incredibly grateful for.

"Ah, yes—before you go, dear?" Momose said right before Mio was about to leave. "Just one last little nugget I want you to have."

Turning around, Mio saw Momose smiling at her with the most devilish grin imaginable. "You're awfully adorable when you're being your little prickly self, and while that's all well and good, I have to say: you look the most cute with a few tearstains on your face," she said. "Bless your heart—I couldn't help but notice that when I saw you yesterday."

Immediately feeling her cheeks redden, Mio hurriedly whipped around and tore open the door.

"You suck."

And with those words—words that hardly served as a proper goodbye—she violently slammed the door behind her.

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It had taken about an hour and a half to travel from Freesia to the Narita Airport. As it was noon on New Year's Eve, the entire place was filled to the brim with people who wished to spend their New Year's abroad; the fact that Mio's head was already pounding from the all-nighter she was pulling was not helped by this.

Having come up with the idea to do all this only last night—or, rather, right as the date had changed—Mio granted herself a healthy dose of praise for her spontaneity. Right now, though, she needed to find a place to sit, so she redirected her focus toward searching for a bench. She was flying standby, after all, and there was still some time left before boarding would begin. She would have vastly preferred to rest in the departures area after checking in, but the number of people in line was overwhelming, and if that wasn't already bad enough, the person at the front was causing a scene with the check-in officer. Mio did not have the strength to stay standing in that line.

Unfortunately, though, every bench she saw was occupied. Various families dotted each one, their excited voices filling the area with a constant cacophony of noise. Throwing her hands in the air in resignation, Mio decided to just sit on the ground beside the benches. However, the moment she started looking for a suitable spot, she suddenly felt a hand grab her shoulder.

Turning around, the first thing she felt upon seeing who had grabbed her was a mixture of surprise and exasperation. And what she went on to say to the man did not hide this fact. "What do you think you're doing?"

It was Shinjo. He was breathing so heavily, it wouldn't have surprised her if he

had just spent the last several minutes running. The bags under his eyes made it clear just how tired he was—in all likelihood, he had not slept at all as a result of having to process yesterday's case.

"Yeah... that's my line..." Shinjo said, out of breath. "You're... going back to... *America*?"

"I am. There's something I have to confirm for myself there."

"What... What about here? You're just going to... leave everything... behind? What about... your work at AH? Your... Your apartment?" Shinjo continued fighting for breath. He then snatched the water bottle Mio had been holding and gulped it down at record speed.

"I've already told you that I've reached my limit here. And it's not like everyone won't be just fine without me," Mio said. "I'll get in contact with you once I've got my feet on the ground. Being able to communicate online should be more than enough."

"You realize there are legal avenues you're supposed to go down when you do stuff like this? And I'd especially appreciate it if you didn't spring it on me like you're doing now—*especially* after everything that happened yesterday."

"Yeah, well, it is what it is. And in regard to the legal stuff, I'll let you deal with all that. Have fun."

"Tell me you're joking."

The two were blocking the flow of traffic now, and the people attempting to pass by were shooting them dirty looks. They opted to move closer to the wall, but when they did, Shinjo's cell phone began to ring. Taking it out of his pocket, he looked at the screen; frowning, he then immediately put it back in his pocket.

"That was someone from the force. You sure you want to ignore your responsibilities like that?" Mio said.

"Yeah, you're one to talk," Shinjo said. He then went quiet for a few moments. "You're leaving all of this behind when there's so much left to do. The least you could do is tell me why."

Mio did not have any confidence that she could explain her feelings well to the detective, so she chose to remain silent. Shinjo, noticing this, did not actively press her further; instead, he waited quietly for her to answer.

Despite not being able to truly organize her feelings, she eventually spoke. "Yesterday's culprit."

"Huh?"

"The username he went by was 'C.'"

"So you admit it...?!" Shinjo shouted in a hushed voice; but Mio ignored him.

"He took it from the acronym for Chaos Child Syndrome, CCS. He told me that he himself didn't have the syndrome, but he still wanted to share the name in

solidarity," she explained. "He considered himself a 'true believer' of Miyashiro and Itou."

"I'm sorry—a *true believer*?"

"Yeah, in the truest form of the words. There are people out there who worship murderers as if they're gods—it's the same concept. I claimed that I was also a true believer in order to get my foot in the door... but I suppose, in the end, maybe I wasn't even lying."

On the 29th, the day before the plan took place, C had asked Mio why she was willing to go to such lengths to achieve her goals. When she read this question, she immediately stopped typing; she was at a complete loss for what to answer. But after a few moments, she responded that she was a true believer of Miyashiro and Itou.

After hesitating, Mio continued. "When I was in the U.S., the Committee took something incredibly precious to me. And I *will* get revenge on them. That has been and always will be my number-one goal, regardless of what happens. However, what exactly this... *hatred* I have is directed toward... and what I was doing at the moment that precious thing was taken from me... I don't really know. Some things are still unclear."

Shinjo stayed silent; this time, he simply listened.

"I know that these things happened so long ago, and that it's way too late to be thinking about them now, but... when I was watching Yuto and Itou, I remembered something. It was faint, but I remembered something," Mio said. "I want to know the whole story. Even after getting that memory back, it still feels like pieces are missing."

As she spoke, Mio didn't seem to notice that the drowsiness that had been plaguing her only moments prior had completely disappeared.

"I don't know what happened, but... what I do know is that it couldn't have been anything good. I've cried over it, damn it... It has to be something bad..."

"Huh..." Shinjo murmured.

"But... Miyashiro and Itou both had things they didn't want to know. Things they wanted to stay in the dark about. But they were forced to learn everything anyway, and once they did... they accepted it. All of it."

Perhaps this sentiment extended to Yuto as well—Yuto, and all the others involved with the case.

"It's my turn now. My turn to learn things I wish I didn't have to," said Mio.

Looking over at the check-in desk, Mio saw that the person causing the scene at the front had disappeared and the line was starting to move forward again—albeit at a fairly slow pace. However, unfortunately for her, the benches were still occupied; thinking to herself that it would be best to move over to departures instead at this point, she took her water bottle back from Shinjo.

"There. You know what I'm doing now. So if you don't mind, I'm gonna go sit

down," she said to him.

Shinjo gave her a single, silent nod and waved goodbye. However, right as Mio was about to get in line to check in, she suddenly remembered something.

"Oh, that's right. Do me a favor, would you?" Reaching into her bag, Mio retrieved the key to her cheap little apartment and tossed it to Shinjo.

"What's this?" Shinjo asked, confused.

"The key to my place. You'll probably find that stupid cat scratching at the window at night. If you see him, grab him and find someone who'll take care of him."

"Uh, are you sure? It's *your* cat."

"I already told you it's not my damn cat. I just feed it every now and then."

"Even that much isn't something I'd normally expect from you."

Was it really that out of character for her? Mio wondered. Perhaps it was.

As she continued to ponder, Mio suddenly remembered the time she had chosen not to tell Senri what Yuto had said. There had been no reason not to tell her; all he had said was that he wanted to see Itou—and if she were to guess, he had likely already told her anyway. So why had she chosen not to say anything?

When she asked herself that question, a certain thought came to mind—but the very moment it did, Mio found herself chuckling at how absurd of an explanation it was.

"Hm. Maybe you're right," Mio mused. "If it's not too much trouble, would you mind bringing it home and taking care of it yourself?"

"I could probably do that. I had a cat back when I lived with my folks."

"Careful. Crazy cat ladies have a pretty tough time landing a husband. Don't want to make your chances even worse."

"Shut it," Shinjo shot back. "So, what's its name?"

"Huh?" The question had taken her by surprise. "Uh... What do you mean?"

"You didn't name it? You took in a cat off the streets, started feeding it, and you never thought to give it a name? You had to have called it *something*."

"Nope. Just 'cat,' 'stupid cat,' and 'you,' really."

"You're joking... Well, fine. Here's your chance to pick one. It's *your* cat, after all."

"For the last time, it's not my damn cat."

But Shinjo refused to back down. Realizing she had no other choice, Mio sighed, pondered for a little bit, then revealed the name she had come up with. "Fine. Call it Black."

"Black?" Shinjo's eyes widened, and he immediately burst out laughing.

Indignant, Mio rushed to defend herself. “What? It’s a black cat. ‘Black.’ What about that doesn’t make sense?”

“No, no—you’re right, I’m sorry. Black is great,” he said with a smirk. “Black... It’s definitely... *charming*.”

Very much annoyed, Mio turned her back to him. “Fine, if you think my name’s so bad, *you* pick one,” she said.

“No, really, I’m serious—Black is good. I promise. Sorry for laughing, it’s just...”

“It’s just what, asshole?”

“It’s impressive how bad you are at this stuff.”

“Go to hell.”

And with those parting words, Mio began her walk toward the check-in line.

◉◉◉

Sounding from the loudspeaker, the check-in officer announced that they were now boarding. As they began to call people up one by one, Mio decided to make a quick phone call, but it went straight to voicemail. Considering the difference in time zones, while it wasn’t quite midnight where she was calling, it was still quite late; in all likelihood, the person she was attempting to call was busy with their research.

A slight smile rose to Mio’s face. How convenient it was to have an avenue through which she could talk with no worry of reply.

“Kurisu. Sorry to spring this on you, but I’ll be crashing at your place for a while. Also, I need some money. I’m flying over there right now and I have no way of covering it. Thanks in advance.”

As she recorded her voicemail, Mio couldn’t help but think of how furious her friend’s face would be once she listened to it. Then, after giving her ETA for when she would be touching down in the U.S., she went to hang up... only to suddenly stop.

This really isn’t like me... she thought to herself.

“Hey, Kurisu...? I have so much to tell you when I get over there. So much has happened... and while in the end, I wasn’t able to accomplish any of the goals I set out to achieve... so, so much has happened. You know how you like to talk about how you met a bunch of people during your time in Japan? Well, I did too. And I want to tell you all about them,” she said. “And I know I’ve never really asked you about them before, but... if you don’t mind, I’d like to hear about the people you met, too.”

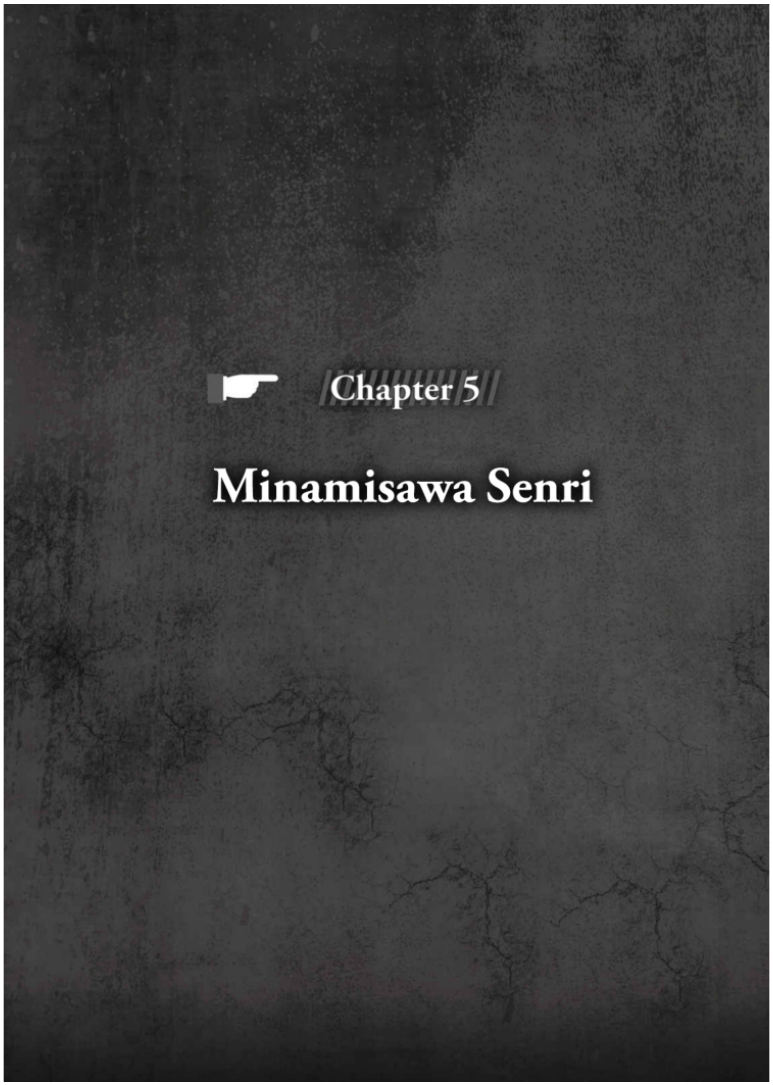
And then, with a smile to herself over how bad she was at this, Mio hung up the phone.

Earlier, when she had been thinking about why she’d kept that secret from Senri, the conclusion she’d come to was that... perhaps some part of her wanted to act as if she shared a secret with Yuto. To her, perhaps... it was like a secret between family.

Mio’s name was called to board the flight; due to the time difference, she would be celebrating the New Year upon arriving in the U.S.

“To a year with no regrets.”

Murmuring that toast to herself, Mio passed through the gate.


Chapter 5
Minamisawa Senri

Dear Takuru,

Hello there. Are you doing well?

This is my first letter to you of the New Year. I hope you've been staying out of trouble and that your last few days have been kind to you.

Thank you so much for your reply. Honestly, I didn't realize how much I apologized in my letters until you mentioned it...

I wonder... Have I managed to worm one into every single letter I've written you before now? If we had been corresponding via email, or something along those lines, I could go back and check, but that option isn't quite available to me in this format... And considering the sheer number I've written to you, my memory fails me when I try to call on it. So I suppose I'm left with no choice but to simply trust you—you're the one with the letters in your possession, after all.

It's difficult for me to put it into words exactly, but that comment definitely threw me for a loop when I read it.

Takuru. There is something I must say.

I owe a great, great deal to you. You carried the world on your shoulders, but there was never anything I could do to ease that burden. Not as your sister, not as a romantic partner—not even as just a simple shoulder for you to lean on. And I was supposed to be closer to you than anyone...

But, with that decision you made, you taught me that I cannot allow myself to be paralyzed by my failures. Even now, you show me this. You *continue* to show me this.

Because of you, I refuse to let my past dictate my future.

Looking back on it, only a few months have passed since you left in October... but so many things have happened during that time—even more than what happened during rehab. I would even venture that the others could say the same.

Let's see... Uki, Yuto, and I accepted Ms. Komori into our family; Kazuki set up her own committee together with Hatsuyama and Nitani; Arimura resolved everything with Ishiwata and was able to move on; and as you might have already heard, Ms. Kunosato is traveling back to the U.S.

I imagine to many others, all of these things would just seem like normal, everyday happenings—that they would seem like nothing of particular note. But for us? They couldn't be any more monumental. That is how much we value the normal lives you gave us—the normal lives you gave us by sacrificing your own future. Though I suppose I'm not sure if that fully applies to Ms. Kunosato... But I do believe she at least thinks similarly to how we do. In fact, I actually have evidence to back this up—although I'm afraid I'm not able to write it here.

Our lives are growing and changing every day, Takuru. This I am sure of.

Can I tell you a funny story?

To celebrate New Year's, we decided to spend both New Year's Eve and New Year's Day enjoying the festivities at Meiji Shrine. The place was packed from head to toe, to the point where we all had to hold hands so we wouldn't get separated. Then, at some point during all the chaos, I dropped my cell phone; I discovered this when a girl about my age gave it back to me. She, too, had come to the shrine along with her friends for the same reason as us. She had seen me drop it in the hustle and bustle of the crowd and had gone out of her way to shove herself through the sea of people to give it back to me. Fortunately for me, it was not broken. It was a little scratched, but there was actually something that concerned me far more: there were a few streaks of blood on it. When I asked where it had come from, the girl told me that her friend who had come with her to the festival had gotten injured slightly while picking my phone up off the ground. I wanted to thank her friend as well, but sadly, we ended up saying our goodbyes before I got the chance to do so.

I'm not quite sure why, but... in that moment, I suddenly remembered that girl.

I remembered *her*.

I don't have a true, grounded reason behind why I believe this, but... in that moment at the shrine, I felt in my heart that she was living her life now just as we have been.

You've given us our lives back, and now, we're all living them. *All* of us. And it's only possible because of you, my dearly beloved.

I promise I won't write another apology as I have before... but there is something else I'd like to offer you in its stead.

Thank you, Takuru. Truly.

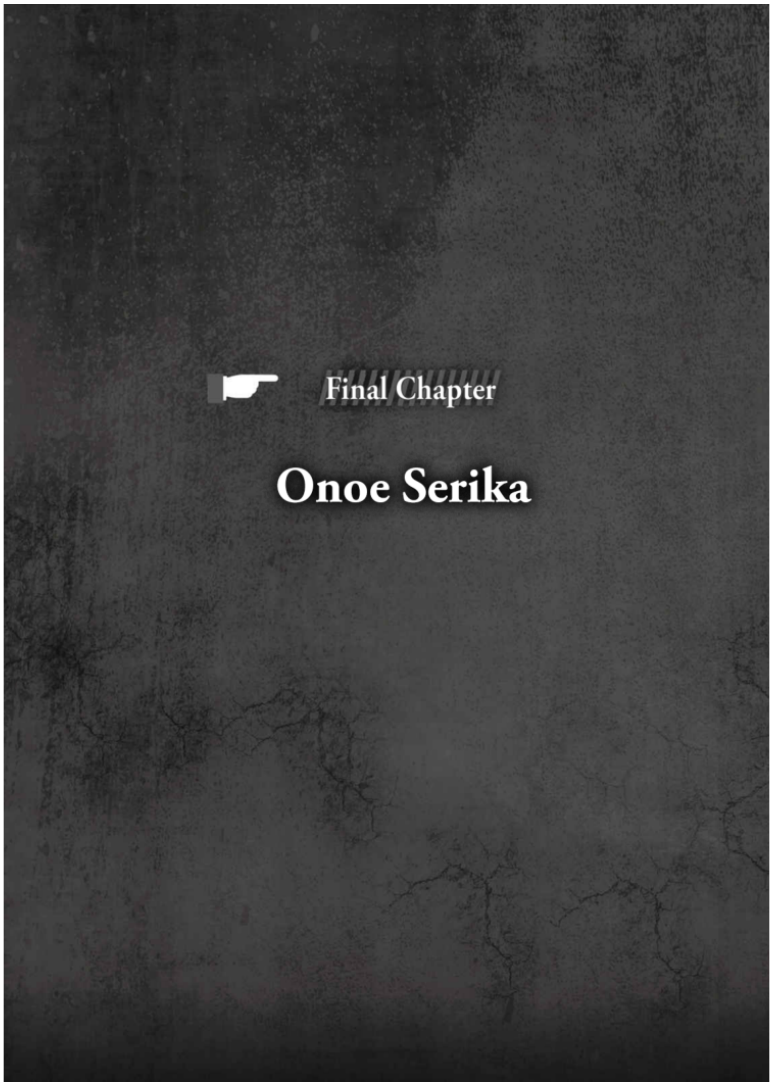
I will be writing to you again.

And before I sign off... Happy New Year, Takuru.

Here's to another year of wonderful letters.

Sincerely yours,

Minamisawa Senri


Final Chapter
Onoe Serika

By the time the distant sound of the temple bell ringing in the New Year faded into the night, it had been about an hour since the clock had struck midnight.

The entirety of Meiji Shrine was packed to the brim with people enjoying the festivities. As the crowd moved haphazardly through the shrine—in a fashion more akin to a turbulent sea rather than orderly lines—it was difficult to even tell whether they were moving forward or backward. It was far and away the most popular destination in all of Japan for New Year's celebrations, and as such, the number of visitors for the first three days of the year alone exceeded three million.

"Bleeegh... I think I'm gonna puke..."

Through footsteps so erratic it was difficult to tell if she was even moving of her own accord, the voice of Onoe Serika just barely escaped through the crowd that was swallowing her whole. Hearing her plea, her two friends who were accompanying her—one on her left, one on her right—stopped to look at her face.

"O-Oh geez, are you okay, Serika? You don't look so good..."

"Pleeease don't puke again... I don't need a repeat of last time... H-Hey, back off, dude!"

Their names were Aoi and Ayaka respectively, the latter of whom had been forced to shove away a random member of the crowd who'd had no sense of personal boundaries. The two attended high school together with Serika in Yokohama.

The friend group's first mistake on that day was relying on the erroneous tip they had received from someone somewhere—one that claimed the shrine would be far less crowded both during and shortly after the countdown on New Year's Eve. And while that might have been *technically* true, tens of thousands of people were not all that much better than hundreds of thousands of people.

It was clear to both her and her friends that this was simply not the best time or place for Serika to be; she had always been particularly bad with crowds.

"Why couldn't we have just gone home after we got hot doooooogssssss...?" Serika whimpered. With a grave look on her face, she glanced over toward the section that was lined from end-to-end with food stalls; unfortunately for her, she was not especially tall, so her view was blocked by a large man—one who seemed to be fairly intoxicated. The sheer pungency of the alcohol on his breath sent her into a spiral of moaning and groaning all over again.

"Well, we wouldn't be here at all if *Ayaka* hadn't said, 'I don't care what happens, we're *going* to that shrine.'" Aoi, seemingly in agreement with Serika's desire to go home, gave Ayaka the side-eye.

"H-Hey, don't pin this on me! You guys wanted to come too! We said we were gonna wish for boyfriends!" Ayaka protested in a voice loud enough to ensure she wasn't drowned out by the crowd.

"No, *you* said that!" Aoi said back, before hesitating. "Er, okay, fine, I *was*

gonna wish for that actually... but I still never said it out loud!"

"Bleeeeeegh..." Serika groaned.

To make a long story short, Ayaka was the one who had brought them to Meiji Shrine that night. All throughout the previous year, she had been watching almost all her friends suddenly get boyfriends, so she was now frantically trying to get one for herself. Serika, meanwhile, couldn't care less about finding a boyfriend, or even about romance at all, for that matter. What she *was* at least somewhat interested in, however, was the event itself: New Year's.

It was tradition in Japan to make a wish at the beginning of the year by praying at a local shrine, and she wanted to make one herself. It sounded like a wonderful idea to her; the shrine *itself*, however, she was quite averse to. This was not only because she had heard the crowds were unreasonably large, but also the fact that, despite it being located in Shibuya, the nearest train station wasn't Shibuya Station—it was a different one. Because of that, the shrine wasn't a place she could simply visit and be back home in the next hour—it was a full commitment.

With these hesitations in mind, she had tried to persuade Ayaka to take them to a different shrine, but Ayaka had refused to budge.

Serika stood up on her toes in an attempt to see above the crowd. "Look, I understand that this only comes around once a year, but..." she trailed off. They were steadily approaching the main shrine, but they had already been in line for around two hours. It seemed to her that they were almost there, but the more she looked, the less convinced she was that they had made much progress at all in the last several minutes.

Her nausea was getting worse and worse, to the point where she considered just throwing in the towel and going home by herself. Right before she could go through with her plan, however, a group of visitors who had just finished praying passed her by.

The crowd was jostling them every which way, and it was clear they were having trouble even standing.

That was when Serika saw it.

She moved without thinking.

"Serika? What are you—?" Aoi tried to ask, but Serika didn't respond. Instead, she immediately tore herself free from the group she was standing in line with and leapt straight to the ground, practically tumbling down onto it.

"Gh...!" She yelped. Someone had stepped on her hand, and a scourge of pain immediately ripped through it. Gritting her teeth, she fought as hard as she could to withstand the pain and look up. She could not see who specifically had stepped on her—all she could see was an unending sea of people.

The back of her hand had been skinned badly, and blood could be seen pooling to the surface. But that didn't matter to her. Instead, she quickly redirected her focus to what she had picked up.

It was a cell phone. Luckily, it hadn't been broken; the case was a little scratched, but the screen itself was completely intact.

"Are you okay, Serika? Do you still feel like throwing up?" Aoi, who had come up beside her, asked in a concerned voice. She was especially concerned when she saw Serika on the ground, but it didn't take long at all for her to quickly stand back up.

"I'm fine," she said.

Aoi's eyes widened. "Wait, Serika! You're bleeding!"

"Oh, this? Yeah. It hurts a little, but I'm fine. More importantly, though, look at what I found!"

"Is that a phone?"

"Yeah. Someone from that group must've dropped it, and someone else came this close to stepping on it..."

Serika pointed to the group of people who were already being swallowed up by a distant part of the crowd. Of course, the people who were leaving the shrine were of a far smaller number than those still meaning to pray, but there was still the very real possibility of losing them in the crowd.

The group continued to move farther and farther away.

"Huh? Who are you pointing to?" Aoi asked as she searched the shrine.

"Them right there—the people holding hands! About our age?"

"Wait, the one with mostly girls and one boy?"

Serika nodded.

"Huh. Surprised you managed to suss them out, considering the size of the crowd and all."

"I just got lucky, that's all. Could you go catch up with them and give this back?"

"Wait, huh? Me?"

"I don't feel good. Please, Aoi?"

This was very abnormal for Serika—she was not one to act so assertive, to the point where it left Aoi stunned for just a moment. But it didn't take long for her to recover from the minor shock; Serika's normal was to *be* abnormal, after all. "Yeah, sure. I got this," Aoi said. "Oh, I told Ayaka to stay in line, by the way! I dunno if they allow you to save spots, but you should at least try to go back and get back in line!"

With those words, Aoi took off running and disappeared into the sea of people.

"Bleeegh... Ow! Man, that freaking hurts..." Sucking on her fingers for a moment in an attempt to dull the pain, Serika pressed a handkerchief to the wound, then started to walk back toward the line.

Ayaka was waiting for her at the side of the crowd. Navigating through them with a number of apologetic bows of the head and “excuse me”s, Serika attempted to make her way back over to her; the people in the crowd likely remembered her—having previously spent two agonizing hours waiting together and all—and thus allowed her to pass without much trouble.

Upon explaining the situation to Ayaka—who was awfully surprised to see her friend had returned injured—what Ayaka said next showed that she was just as frustrated as she was impressed with Serika. “God, I can never take you anywhere, I swear... I never know what you’ll do next,” she said.

After about five minutes, Aoi rejoined them in the line, having made her way through the crowd in the same manner as Serika.

“Did you get it back to them?” Serika asked her.

Aoi nodded. “Yeah. She thanked you for picking it up for her. She also said to make sure you bandage up your hand.”

“Huh? How’d she...?”

“Yeah, well, you maaaybe sooort of got some of your blood on it... But I told her about what happened and she was super cool about it! That’s when she said that thing—to bandage up your hand, I mean. She was almost like a doctor or a nurse or something.”

“Huh.”

“She was practically glowing the whole time, Serika. Nice work!”

“Was she really? That’s awesome.”

Enduring the pain in her fingers, Serika resigned herself to wait for her turn to pray. Fortunately for her, the throbbing pain in her hand had entirely replaced the nausea from before.

Eventually, just after the clock struck 2:00 AM, it was finally her and her friends’ turn to pray. Instead of the typical offertory box, a large white rug had been laid out in front of the main shrine for the offerings. The offeror would then bow twice, place their hands together in prayer twice, then leave. Considering the sheer number of people there, the ritual changing was unavoidable, but Serika couldn’t help but feel it took away a great deal of the magic.

Her friend seemed to agree. “Man, this sucks... How’s throwing a couple coins on a dirty old rug gonna get me a boyfriend? Where’s the magic?” Ayaka said.

Serika chuckled, then, together with Aoi, the two girls agreed that they had already come all this way, and Ayaka reluctantly stepped forward. Due to her very tight budget, Serika took out the money she had—a five-yen coin—and threw it onto the rug. Then, following the ritual, she gave two deep bows, and placed her hands together twice.

“Uh... Hmm...”

Now that she was finally at the top, Serika realized that she had yet to come up

with the entire reason she was there in the first place: her wish.

Her mind was about to throw itself into disarray, when suddenly, her hand—the hand slightly stained with her blood—entered her thoughts.

“All right, I got it.”

I wish that everybody in the world has the best year ever.

Speaking this wish clear inside her heart, she bowed once more.

“Okay, can we go home now?” Aoi asked, and Serika nodded. Then, as she jokingly asked Ayaka what kind of boyfriend she had wished for, the three friends entered the sea of people heading for the exit. However, the moment Serika was about to set foot down the stairs, she suddenly stopped.

In that moment, the scenery before her—a view as normal as could be—rooted her to the ground. So many people surrounded her that she could not even see her feet. So many of them were smiling—smiling at their friends and family as they celebrated the New Year.

“Serika? Are you feeling sick again?”

Serika heard Aoi call her name. For some reason unknown to her, her eyes had welled up with tears; wiping them away, she shook her head.

“No, no, I’m fine. Let’s go, guys.”

New Year’s Day.

The beginning of a new year and a new life.

And on that day—that new beginning—Serika began to walk without looking back.

The End

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